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The strategy of transitional demands

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1. On the dialectics of productivity, relations of production and emancipation

A red thread through the history of the labour movement of Western Europe is the break between daily demands and struggles on the one side, and the struggle for the end goal (or the conquest of political power to achieve that final goal) on the other. Only during rare moments, such as the German November Revolution of 1918, the deep crisis of 1923 in Germany or the initial response of the Spanish working class to the fascist military coup in 1936, does a certain fusion between the two take place.

It is true that daily demands were not always purely economic in character. There were important struggles for universal suffrage (including general strikes in Belgium and Austria), struggles to ward off reactionary attacks on democratic freedoms (the general strike against the Kapp-putsch in Germany, against the return of King Leopold III in Belgium), there were even mass movements against the threat of war (those are mostly forgotten today: for example, Italy 1911 and 1912). One can also think of the political mass strike in Britain against the proposed anti-strike law of the Heath government [in 1971].

But characteristic of all these struggles for direct demands is that their realization does not immediately

endanger the survival of the capitalist mode of production. No matter how strongly the bourgeois class may oppose such demands, however much capitalists may bemoan the fact that such-and-such an increase in wages will ruin them: capitalism has endured and will continue to endure such struggles because they do not attack the two essential pillars of bourgeois society: the power of capital's disposal over the means of production and labour power on the one hand, and the bourgeois state apparatus, the political power of capital, on the other.

One illusion which recurs again and again in the history of modern class struggle is that capitalism has become so exhausted that it simply cannot digest a 10 per cent (or 15 or 20 per cent) increase in wages or a reduction of the normal working day by another hour, and that struggle for such demands must lead to the fall of capitalism. History has shown the incorrectness of this argument.

Not, for example, that there could not be situations determined by cyclical or structural crises in which a significant increase in wages would affect the 'last substance' of surplus value (e.g., in the economic crisis of 1929-32). During such situations, the capitalist class will under no circumstances grant such a demand - not even in the face of fierce struggle (another question, by the way, is whether such situations create favourable conditions

for the struggle for economic demands). However, if the struggle of the working class reaches such proportions that a pre-revolutionary or revolutionary situation is imminent, then the attitude of bourgeoisie towards direct demands will immediately change. Faced with the risk of losing power, the bourgeoisie, perhaps with a heavy heart, will be ready for any concession in the field of daily demands, as a lesser evil.

And it can consider all concessions in the field of everyday demands as lesser evils since it has two mechanisms at its disposal to digest them, i.e. to reverse their negative impact on the rate of profit, on the valorization [1] of capital: on the one hand, via the thousand levers of the economy and economic policy controlled by capital (price increases, inflation, monetary devaluation, increase in productivity, increase in the production of relative surplus value, etc.); on the other hand, via the lever of the state apparatus, of political power which can be used to attempt to suppress and atomize the working class in order to overcome a crisis of the valorization of capital.

Behind the binary opposition 'daily demands vs final goal' lies a specific diagnosis of the objective situation and a certain perspective. This was most clearly expressed in classical social democracy before the First World War. Social democracy

explained its concentration on immediate demands (good election results plus successful trade union activity) with the double hypothesis that the subjective conditions for the fall of capitalism were not yet ripe, because the 'organization of the working class' was still too weak (electoral action and trade union activity would increase this organizational strength) and that the system itself was 'drifting towards a catastrophe' which had to be waited for before 'one could go on the attack'. [2]

Those who no longer believed in the catastrophe because they were convinced of a gradual softening of the contradictions (both domestic and international) quite logically did away with the 'final goal', as did, for example, Bernstein. Those who still believed in the catastrophe were content to wait for it while in the meantime proper organizing was carried out (Kautsky). But for the one as for the other, the restriction to everyday demands, to a reformist daily practice, corresponded to an assessment of the stability of bourgeois society in which there could be no short- or medium-term revolutionary prospects.

Today we find the same ideological background in those so-called communists (Lenin would hardly recognize them as such) who limit themselves to reformist daily practice (some—the Maoists—while zealously pursuing revolutionary propaganda which is completely detached from daily demands; the others - the 'official' Communist parties - in simultaneous revisionist abandonment of even this propaganda). They tacitly agree with what Brezhnev told representatives of the Czechoslovak Communist Party: that there is no chance of a socialist revolution in Western Europe in the coming fifty years. [3]

Some give a purely economic explanation for this (the ability of monopoly capitalism to resolve crises; the backwardness of the Soviet economy which first must catch up with the capitalist world, etc.). Others argue with formulas that include the subjective factor ('As long as there is no strong revolutionary party there

can be no truly revolutionary crisis; such a party can be created only over a long process. Consequently, no truly revolutionary crisis is possible for a long time', etc.). In practice, at best this means a return to the classical pre-1914 social democratic approach, at worst this means an approach akin to that of post-war social democracy (consider the participation of the Finnish Communist Party in a coalition government which, after devaluing the currency, introduced a wage freeze at the expense of the working class).

The absence of revolutionary perspectives or, what amounts to the same, arbitrary and subjective definitions of pre-revolutionary and revolutionary crises in the imperialist and late capitalist era, form the not always consciously recognized, objective basis on which the dualism 'daily demands vs final goal' rests.

2. The epoch of imperialism as an epoch of structural social crisis

Revolutionary Marxism starts from the position that since the beginning of imperialist epoch - taking into account the inevitable 'lag' of consciousness and the social superstructure in general behind the development of the base - this dualism no longer corresponds to the objective demands that the development of bourgeois society makes on the workers' movement. At the latest since the Russian Revolution of 1905, what Lenin called the epoch of the 'general crisis of capitalism' is characterized neither by a straightforwardly deepening economic crisis, nor by a complete end to the growth of the productive forces, nor by constantly worsening mass misery. It is rather characterized by a growing contradiction between the development of the productive forces and the self-sustaining capitalist relations of production.

This growing contradiction leads to a *growing structural instability of the system*. A severe economic crisis (1929, 1937), monetary crisis (United States 1970), political crisis (Spain 1936, France 1968), or military crisis (France: Algerian War 1955-58; United States: Vietnam War since 1966) can suddenly plunge a seemingly stable society into a

generalized social crisis. If this crisis coincides with a growing wave of self-activity, self-confidence and combat readiness of the working class, then objectively a pre-revolutionary crisis arises. This is not always the case (it was not the case in the 1929, 1958 and 1970 examples just cited but it did happen in 1918, 1936 and 1968). Under conditions of cyclical rising and declining waves of class struggle this is periodically the case. In the era of the general crisis of capitalism, inevitable periodic outbursts of gigantic mass struggles (mass strikes, general strikes, general strikes with factory occupations, etc.) are inevitable and to a large extent independent of the coming of a deep economic crisis.

Since the First World War, the most important of these waves has occurred in the imperialist countries: in Germany 1918-19 and 1922-23 (with an interlude, the general strike in 1920 against the Kapp Putsch); in France 1936-37, 1944-1948 and 1968-70; in Spain 1931-37; in Italy 1943-48 and 1968-70; in Britain since 1966. Equally huge mass strikes, which, however, did not yet threaten the fundamental stability of bourgeois society, occurred in the United States in the years 1936-37 and in 1945-46, as well as in Japan in the early 1950s. It is important to underline that the wave now sweeping across Western Europe (10 million participants in the 1968 general strike in France; 15 million participants in the various general strikes in Italy 1969-70; an ascending wave of mass strikes in Britain) quantitatively and in terms of objectively endangering bourgeois society far exceeds all previous ones, with the possible exception of the threat to Spanish bourgeois society in 1936 (when the urban proletariat constituted barely 30 percent of the Spanish population; it now constitutes over 50 per cent in Spain itself and more than 70 per cent in the countries mentioned earlier).

One could, considering this rediscovered 'actuality of the revolution' in the imperialist countries, dig out the old Kautskyian scheme and apply it to the present time with only slight changes. A socialist strategy would then consist in focusing on daily struggles that

prepare ('fertilize', 'accelerate', 'illuminate': the variations are innumerable) such periodic pre-revolutionary crises. Since, as is well known, Marxists have never believed that one could evoke, produce, provoke pre-revolutionary or revolutionary crises - all, the infamous 'objective laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production' do this - such a strategy wisdom once again amounts to waiting: while waiting for the pre-revolutionary crisis, one does something else, namely, the traditional, familiar routine: wage struggles, electoral struggles, propaganda and education and above all organization. It is of no importance whether many neo-Kautskyians emphasize this part or that part. Many even want to eliminate an element (e.g., the electoral struggle) completely. Fundamentally, one waits for Godot - just as Karl Kautsky and Otto Bauer waited for the 'final catastrophe' (or even more grotesquely: for the 'decisive error of the enemy' which turned out to be the decisive initiative of the enemy).

The crucial error in this reissue of the strategy of patient waiting is its underestimation of the subjective factor in the class struggle and especially the dual nature of the subjective factor. The Subjective factor includes not only the organization of the vanguard of the working class, but equally working-class consciousness, its understanding of social and political developments and its capacity for political struggle. As is well known, among broader masses consciousness is only to a limited extent the product of written propaganda and education. Mass consciousness is determined decisively by experience, that is, by lived self-activity. In this sense, Rosa Luxemburg was absolutely right in her criticism of Kautsky during the debates on the mass strike (which at the time included a justified criticism of certain polemical positions of Lenin, positions which he had overcome since the 1905 revolution). It is unrealistic to hope that without experience of struggle by the masses before the revolutionary crisis, these same masses during such a crisis will show revolutionary consciousness and launch revolutionary initiatives. What the masses will do during a crisis is to

a considerable degree a function of what they have done and experienced before this it. [4]

A socialist strategy based on the inevitable periodic outbreaks of mass struggles - the theoretical foundation and empirical confirmation of this thesis seems clear to us - must therefore concentrate on forms of daily agitation that convey to the working masses the experiences of struggle and insights that are necessary for revolutionary initiatives and consciousness to unfold as widely as possible at breaking points. Such breaking points are the outbreak of mass strikes, at the beginning of major financial, monetary, military crises, at the onset of a serious economic recession, etc. *This is the central function of the strategy of transitional demands, with the struggle for workers' control as its axis.*

By this we do not mean to deny the necessity of traditional everyday demands in questions of tariff policy, reduction of working hours, sickness and social insurance, etc. What Marx said about this more than a hundred years ago remains as true today as it was then: if the working class were to give up the struggle for immediate demands, then the sale of commodity labour power below its value would become the general rule and a process of atomization and demoralization of the working class would begin. What is decisive here is whether one limits oneself to this traditional routine or includes in the daily struggle goals with a twofold character. These goal most correspond to the educational and emancipating role of the qualitative needs of the working masses, needs that are born, so to speak, from the objective development of late capitalism. Second, they need to be goals that cannot be integrated into the capitalist system because of *their immediate anti-systemic character.*

3. Two different ways of rushing forward

As an alternative solution to the central task of today's workers' movement, that of overcoming the old dualism between immediate demands that can be integrated into the system,

and goals that remain detached from the daily struggle, different strategies are being defended by socialists. Two strategies which differ from the strategy of transitional demands need to be commented on.

The main weakness of the strategy of 'counter systemic or transformative reforms' [5] is the failure to understand the structural character of the capitalist mode of production, i.e. the fixed nature of the two central pillars mentioned above: the relations of production and state power (the state apparatus). Neither can be changed gradually. They can either continue to function or be paralyzed during a severe social crisis. But if this crisis does not lead to their abolition, they will inevitably work their way up from this paralysis to a renewed normalization.

Marx, in his attempt at a simple explanation of his value theory in the famous letter to Kugelmann, based himself on the assumption that no society could continue to exist if all producers stopped working. [6] But the way in which the work of the producers is organized is not random, they work in a particular mode of production, under specific relations of production.

If one were to begin to dissolve existing relations of production without immediately replacing them with others, it would only mean that production would cease to function, that producers would cease to work. It would be physically impossible for this to continue for a long time. *Since any onset of the dissolution of the existing relations of production renders the existing mode of production incapable of production, i.e. leads to the rapid decline of productive activity, there are during a severe social crisis only two possibilities: either a rapid dissolution of the existing mode of production and the introduction of a new one, or a return to the 'normalized' relations of production.* There is no third solution: that is the lesson of all revolutionary crises in the West since the First World War. [7]

The advocates of a gradual taking of power do not understand this rigidity of production relations in the complex totality characteristic of modern class

relations in bourgeois society. To believe that one could erode the profit-determined nature of investment the same way in which one can introduce urban tramways, generalize primary education or nationalize (at a loss) individual branches of industry, means not to understand that under such conditions, the investment activity of entrepreneurs ceases completely and the whole capitalist economy comes to a standstill. This is the concrete content of the thesis that the onset of the dissolution of capitalist relations of production renders capitalist production incapable of functioning.

If the proponents of transformative reforms were to think their ideas through to the end, they would be faced with the following alternatives: Either such reforms can be accepted by capitalist firms, although under relationship of forces particularly favorable to the workers, while the capitalist economy continues to function (or even flourish: see Sweden). That would prove that these reforms are humane, liberal, progressive but not transformative. After all, a system that continues to function is one that has not been overcome. No one has yet mastered the art of forcing capitalists to continue to invest and to ensure high levels of employment and technical progress while at the same time reducing the rate of profit to 1 or even zero per cent.

The other possibility is that capitalists will not accept these 'transformative reforms' since those are in fact threatening the valorization of capital. In this case, large-scale capital flight, investment strikes, mass layoffs, currency speculation, rapid inflation, etc., will follow. The transformative nature of the reforms will be proven by the fact that the system indeed ceases to function. But no modern industrial nation can survive for long as production facilities lie idle, and there is rapidly increasing unemployment, continued wastage of resource reserves and stagnant technical progress. A government that began to introduce such transformative reforms under exceptionally a favourable relationship of forces would then either need to substitute itself for the 'striking

capitalists', or allow the working class to substitute for these capitalists by socializing the economy and replacing the dysfunctional capitalist economic system with a functioning socialized system. [8] The only other option is to convince the capitalists to make the economy function again, or in other words to capitulate to them and undo the transformative character of the reforms.

This is not a purely theoretical question. Many social democratic governments or governments under social democratic leadership have been faced with such choices: in 1919 in Germany, in 1936 in France, in 1945 in Italy, in 1950 in Britain and again in 1965 in Britain. We know how such governments, without exception, have reacted. And we also know that the bourgeois nature of the state apparatus (ministry officials, the upper echelons of the central banking system, the repressive apparatus, all closely intertwined with the ruling layers of big business) plays a significant role in convincing the reforming comrades that the 'unusually favourable' relationship of forces (for example, not just 50.1 per cent of the electorate votes, but as much as 52 per cent or, who knows, maybe even 55 per cent) on closer inspection is not at all as favourable as it seemed....

We call the strategy of transformative reforms a strategy of rushing forward because it is based on the unrealistic premise that socialism can be built, so to speak, city by city, department by department and firm by firm, without first having abolished the capitalist relations of production and the bourgeois state. The theory, now widespread in French left-Catholic circles, of an immediate introduction of 'self-management' in companies (admittedly less is spoken of *workers' self-management*) without abolishing the capitalist mode of production in its totality and the capitalist state apparatus that defends it, has a similar character of rushing forward. [9]

From this strategy can emerge, at best, independent cooperatives that are subsequently forced to engage in capitalist competition in a capitalist market with capitalist enterprises.

Such cooperatives must then introduce capitalist rationalization, capitalist acceleration of the assembly line, capitalist cost-cutting and capitalist redundancies, or face their demise. This is what Marx explained to Proudhon more than 125 years ago and it has been confirmed again and again since then. Free competition and private labour still prevail, i.e. generalized commodity production with its delightfully humanist motif: *homo homini lupus* - man is man a wolf. The direct social character of labour and the genuine association of all producers - the two main conditions for a socialist transformation of economy and society according to Marx - is something else entirely.

The strategy proposed by the Italian spontaneists of Lotta Continua of not only conquering company by company but also refusing to pay rent and taxes, occupy lawns for the children, etc., has the same character of rushing forward. Exactly like the left reformists, these comrades share the illusion of a step-by-step replacement of bourgeois society, they do not understand the structural character of capitalist relations of production and the bourgeois state.

A similar character of rushing forward can be seen in the attempt of the Italian Manifesto group to promote a demand belonging to the *communist phase* of the post-capitalist development of society and economy, namely the abolition of the division of labour between manual and mental labour as a central *immediate* demand. [10] If such a demand were to be taken seriously and made a direct goal of the struggle, it would mean either pure utopia (with the existing technology it is impossible to completely abolish the division of labour immediately after the socialist revolution without a preceding revolution of the entire educational and labour system, to say nothing of such an abolition in individual companies under capitalism), or it is simply a piece of ideology, meaning, in the last instance, a deception. If, as in for example Chinese companies after the Cultural Revolution, managers and technicians work one day a week in direct production while manual workers deal with management, the

division of labour is not abolished but confirmed and strengthened. At most, it is now even more concealed from producers than before. But as is well known, Marxists do not believe that it is possible to abolish social phenomena by thinking them away while odious reality continues to assert itself.

If, on the other hand, such a demand has a propagandist-educational character, it would have a certain use as it draws the attention of public opinion (and primarily of the working class) to the enormous emancipatory potentialities hidden in the present state of development of the productive forces. But the consciousness and needs thus awakened do not in themselves solve the central problem of the subjective factor. They can only contribute to a solution if they are included in a programme of transitional demands, a programme based on the complex totality of economic and social problems that preoccupy the toiling masses. This totality not only awakens these masses but by necessity periodically leads to mass struggle.

But such a complex and coherent programme of transitional solutions is missing from the programmatic statement of the Italian Manifesto group. If under such circumstances the slogan 'communism - now' is applied in a propagandist, educational fashion (and on this slogan turns the demand for the abolition of the distinction between manual and main labour), it leaves the central task unresolved because it does not give rise to mass actions of workers that can break up the system. This slogan will never lead to a general strike, the formation of workers' councils in a country (to say nothing of a continent), the conquest of political power, or the transformation of capitalist into socialized relations of production.

4. Development of the means of production as the origin of the intensifying crisis of late capitalism

There is some truth in the reasoning that led the Manifesto group to this forward rush. To draw up a socialist strategy today in the same terms and

with the same slogans as in the 1920s and 1930s means turning one's back on the new elements emerging from the growth of the productive forces over the last twenty years. This would demonstrate a conservatism unworthy of a Marxist.

Nothing underlines more strongly the systemic crisis of the late-capitalist social order than the fact that even under seemingly favourable conditions for capitalism of accelerated economic growth and only moderate overproduction crises (demonstrable for the first period after the Second World War), this crisis of society actually intensified. [11] While one could imagine that the large-scale workers' struggles in Western Europe after the First World War and in the 1930s were partly no more than explosive reactions to misery, hunger, oppression, war, mass unemployment and fascism, this is impossible for the wave of mass strikes rolling across Europe since May 1968. This wave came not after a long phase of stagnant or declining real wages and living standards, but after one of an almost uninterrupted rise in real wages, one that raised living standards faster than ever before in history. [12]

This is exactly what is so ominous for capital about this wave of mass strikes: if the toiling masses are acting so energetically and militantly under conditions that are still relatively 'stable' and 'favourable' for the capitalist economy, what will be their reaction when the conjuncture turns, when real wages begin to stagnate or decline, when mass long-term unemployment re-appears?

For thousands of years, economic history unfolded under pressure of a dialectical contradiction and unity of opposites. On the one hand, every advance in labour productivity is accompanied by a deepening division of labour (and for the most part it was determined by it. The development of irrigation technology in agriculture; the development of handiwork leading to blacksmiths and the utilization of metal in tools of labour; the emergence of trade over long distances; technical progress, determined by the use of water power as productive energy; industrial

revolution). On the other hand, the more the division of labour increases, the more labour productivity increases. This increase means also the increase of material needs, of mutual dependence and the objective cooperation of individuals in economic life. On the one hand, the increasing division of labour tears apart total social labour power into innumerable types of private labour, all carried out separately from each other; on the other hand, the growing interpenetration of economic life across an ever wider field leads to the objective socialization of labour. In the capitalist mode of production, the two poles of this dialectical unity unfold and reach their sharpest contradiction. The producer is made to be a part of the machine; but labour is at the same time increasingly objectively socialized, not only nationally but also internationally.

Only two mechanisms, fundamentally different from each other, exist that can partially bridge the growing gap between an increasing division of labour and the necessity of cooperation in labour. This can be done either by conscious leadership *a priori* or by spontaneous market laws *a posteriori*. In the first case, the private character of labour is abolished as labour acquires a directly social character in spite of the division of labour. (In the case of primitive societies, this gap has not yet emerged). Independent from their individual effort, through conscious leadership, individuals can acquire a right to a share in the social consumption fund. In this case, economic resources are distributed among the different branches of the economy on the basis of predetermined social criteria and not on the basis of the relative 'profitability' of each branch.

In the second case, spontaneous market laws are dominant. The private nature of labour is confirmed by the private ownership of the fruits of production (and later the private ownership of the means of production, later still of capital). The contradiction between the private nature of labour and objectively necessary social cooperation is realized through a shared nexus: exchange value (the commodity form of production). [13]

The law of value distributes economic resources between different branches of the economy 'behind the backs of the producers' through the detour of the market, solvent demand and - in capitalism - of the swings of the rate of profit (i.e. deviations from the average rate of profit in individual branches of the economy).

When society is poor and the productive forces relatively undeveloped, the industrial and human potentials are almost unlimited. In such a situation this mechanism has a semblance of rationality. But in an era of growing social abundance, of a high degree of development of the productive forces and the beginning elimination of living labour from the production process (the use of automation), it has clearly become irrational. Today it is not merely irrational and senseless, but even dangerous to the survival of civilization, if not for the physical survival of humanity, to allow the 'free buying and selling' of atomic bombs and harmful products in food, 'free initiative' in the production of passenger cars, 'free' pollution of air, water and seas. And yet this is what it means to bring about the 'unification' of private labour and total social labour *a posteriori* through market laws and the search for profit by individual firms. As long as it concerns such special cases, every child is can see it is irrational. But is it really only about special cases?

As the productive forces develop while capitalist relations of production (i.e. the compulsion to valorize capital) remain in place, the waste of material and human resources takes on unprecedented proportions. This is so during peacetime, not to mention the wastage that is arms production. Seen from the point of view of social development, the production of a second or third passenger car for the average household, a second refrigerator, electric knives and electric shoe-brushes which save at most seconds of labour, is as pointless, as much a waste, as the orgies of the Roman nobility in the period from Tiberius to Diocletian, or the excesses of the French nobility under Louis XV and Louis XVI. This is all the more so when millions of human lives are lost, especially in the Third World, lives

that could be saved with a fraction of those wasted resources. At the same time millions of the world's youth are not given the education that would bring them up to the optimum level of technology and science since resources are lacking and the system is afraid of producing a too numerous and overeducated academic proletariat.

The development of the productive forces implies that the decisive social tension that drives the working masses to revolutionary action - and is in the first place expressed by the youth - *is no longer the tension between what is and what was, but between what is and what has become possible*. Not coincidentally, in the French [events of] May [1968], for the first time in the history of political struggle, the slogan *L'imagination au pouvoir* (imagination to power) surfaced. This slogan is not a product of overexcited Utopian dreamers. It is a product of late-capitalist technology and production itself. The growing saturation of rational needs leads the market economy ad absurdum. This leads to questioning and then the breaking of capitalist relations of production, long before a stage of general saturation is reached.

5. Neither economism nor voluntarism

Under such circumstances, a question that played an important role in the post-capitalist societies of the East is re-emerging among the radicalized intelligentsia of the West, namely the question of the causal relations and interactions in the sequence 'relations of production/productive forces/consciousness'.

For some, the factor of productive forces is decisive: Roger Garaudy represents the more 'optimistic' variant of this view, Herbert Marcuse the more pessimistic one. The first believes in a more or less automatic transformation of the relations of production as a result of changed productive forces (the 'technical-scientific revolution'); the second believes in the inevitable enslavement of the workers (of humanity really, except for a marginal minority) as a result of a specific form of machinery and economic 'automatism' (in the

double sense of the word). [14] Consciousness appears for both as more or less directly determined by the relations of production. With Garaudy this takes the form of the belief that the 'new productive forces unfolding in the womb of the old social order' more or less automatically create the consciousness appropriate to them. With Marcuse it implies that consciousness is more or less condemned to be manipulated, integrated and destroyed by the old relations of production.

Still others (especially the so-called spontaneists and some of the Maoists) regard the factor of consciousness as autonomous to an almost absolute degree, especially under the relations created by the third technological revolution. Since the opposition between productive forces and relations of production has intensified to an unprecedented degree, they argue, revolutionary initiative, the revolutionary will, can achieve practically anything. At any arbitrary point - for example, free spaces, the refusal to consume, and through individual 'indulging in collective joy' - the system can be destabilized. While with the hippies this attitude is harmless as it is without effect on society as a whole, it becomes harmful where through voluntarist formulas it attempts to prevent forms of workers' struggle and workers' organization that actually could destabilize the system. 'Down with the delegates, let us all be delegates' cried the Italian spontaneists at the height of the strike wave. Of course, the consequence was not that all workers acted permanently as 'delegates'; they simply cannot do that under capitalist relations of production. The consequence was that the trade union bureaucracy, the traditional parties, the bosses and the state apparatus were able to 'normalize' the situation much more easily and quickly than if the workers had been able to establish permanent organs of struggle (embryonic organs of dual power).

There is an element of truth in both tendencies, which is to say that they are both completely wrong as they tear apart two arbitrary aspects of a single unitary reality and provide a distorted picture of this reality.

It is true that the increasing tension between growing productive forces and frozen relations of production increasingly undermines the latter. At one blow, as in the French May, their exhaustion can be revealed. Almost 'out of a clear sky', 10 million French workers spontaneously occupy workplaces and show their objective tendency to eliminate the capitalist entrepreneur, meaning capitalist relations of production. But entrepreneurs, the private ownership of the means of production, the commodity nature of labour power, the generalized market economy, the command power of capital over labour: all these features of capitalist relations of production disappear neither automatically nor by themselves. They must be abolished, i.e. replaced by other relations of production, brought about by a social revolution that wrests state power from the bourgeois class. If this does not happen, everything will return to the same old pattern - despite the technical-scientific revolution and the growing contradiction between productive forces and productive relations.

The conscious act, the consciously directed and planned 'qualitative leap' at the height of generalized mass action, is not only indispensable, it is decisive. If this act is missing, then even the most favourable objective conditions are wasted. On this point the voluntarists and the subjectivists are entirely right and can quote numerous prominent witnesses. [15] The lapidary thesis of the Cubans that 'It is the duty of all revolutionaries, to make revolution' remains an indispensable truth. Only incorrigible fatalists believe that 'subversion carried out by the objective developments' could replace revolutionary initiative.

It is, however, now a question of determining which act, by whom, and when makes a social revolution possible in a highly developed industrial country. All those who attribute this task to a few arbitrary fringe groups forget that such groups do not possess the objective power to abolish the capitalist relations of production. The anarchists and their progeny, the hippies of every kind, 'instead of waiting for the revolution,

make it an everyday reality' and do not in any way abolish capitalist relations of production. Neither will a million hippies retreating from consumer society into a subculture bring the goal of ending the compulsion for workers to sell their labour power closer. At best, they will have formed a 'subsidiary society' in the pores of ongoing capitalist exploitation, a subsidiary society that, moreover, lives mostly off the waste products of this exploitation. What matters is not the liberation of the few, but the liberation of all. After all, the emancipation of the social individual can only mean the emancipation of all social relations, not withdrawal from society.

Attempts to begin emancipation among fringe groups are sterile, however sympathetic they may be. The ability of students and the revolutionary intelligentsia to be the fuse in revolutionary crises stems precisely from the fact that, in the wake of the third technological revolution, in the context of late capitalism, this social group tends to lose its character as a fringe group. Only that social class which is capable, first, of actually abolishing the capitalist relations of production and, second, of replacing them in the production process and economic life with more progressive relations of production, can constitute the decisive revolutionary subject of liberation, of the social revolution. This social class is more than ever the modern proletariat. The fundamental flaw of modern society, alienated labour, cannot be undone outside the actual labour process.

Using the criterion of the fall of the capitalist mode of production, revolutionary initiative, 'activism' or 'voluntarism' is only productive when it directly or indirectly strengthens the self-consciousness of the proletariat. Such actions need to contribute to how proletariat itself learns about its capacity to transform society. This brings us back to our starting point: the central task of revolutionary Marxists in the imperialist countries is to induce, through education, propaganda, agitation and the experience of struggle, ever wider layers of the working class to fight for demands (mass strikes, general

strikes, general strikes with factory occupations) that cannot be integrated into a normally functioning capitalist mode of production. Only in this way, when the inevitable waves of mass struggle occur, can a social revolution in an industrially highly developed society actually be put on the immediate agenda.

6. The crisis of capitalist relations of production as a crisis of the authoritarian workplace structure

One of the clearest signs of the deepening crisis shaking capitalist relations of production is the increasing contestation of the authority of the capitalist boss in the workplace and the whole economy. The reasons for this are clear: they lie in the contradiction between, on the one hand, the ever-increasing objective socialization of labour and the rising objective need for cooperation between individuals, firms, industries, nations, even continents and, on the other hand, the embittered attempt to maintain the grip of private initiative, private property and private profit over this massive complex.

More and more branches of industry only exist thanks to state orders. More and more research projects are financed by public money. More and more companies are saved from bankruptcy only through state subsidies. But at the same time, we stubbornly refuse to speak the truth about this situation: that the logic of contemporary technology corresponds to the immediately social character of labour. Recognizing this would make it possible to eliminate countless sources of waste, save huge amounts of economic resources (especially the most important resource: working time) and allow labour productivity to take a tremendous leap forward. The elimination of individual corporate profit in favour of prioritizing benefits for society as a whole would make it possible to recognize phenomena like environmental pollution for what they are: 'savings' or 'increased revenues' for individual entrepreneurs at the cost of increased expenditures for society as a whole.

With the increasing objective compulsion to socialize labour, there

is a growing criticism of the attempt to continue to subject social labour to the tyrannical control of a few. We owe nothing of what we are exclusively to our individual selves. Even the most brilliant inventors, researchers and scientists would not be able to achieve what they do, if hundreds of thousands of workers did not create the necessary laboratories, rooms, machines and devices. Through the surplus value squeezed out of them, such workers provide others the necessary leisure time. Those hundreds of thousands of workers keep the complex whole of the economy going. The social needs called forth by this serve as stimuli and thousands upon thousands of other inventors, researchers, scientists perform the mental work that provides the foundation for the achievements of 'geniuses'.

We can realise our personal talents only as part of social labour power. But this capacity is not the labour capacity of freely associated producers: it is subjugated to centralized command power in a pyramid-shaped hierarchy in which, as in an army, there are foot soldiers, non-commissioned officers, officers and a small general staff. This general staff is not democratically elected and cannot be revoked by the mass of the producers - and the notion that the mass of shareholders would be able to do this has long since been recognized as fiction. Instead, capital relations reproduce this general staff again and again. [16]

In the workplace and the corporate group (to say nothing of the financial sector), the noble principles of 'pluralism' that the apologists of the 'free market economy' offer in the marketplace of ideas do not apply. Here, the ruling principles are secrecy rather than openness (because the 'enemy', i.e. the competition, is listening in) and obedience rather than freedom is imperative. Here, in fact, lies the Achilles' heel of late capitalism: for the more labour is objectively socialized, the more the productive forces grow, the more scarcity disappears, the higher the level of education and the average degree of qualification of the wage-dependent becomes, the more unbearable such direct 'subsumption

of labour to capital' must appear.

This is the root cause of the French May [1968], of the Italian 'hot autumn and winter' of 1969-70 and the wave of wildcat strikes sweeping across Europe. The root is not the demand for higher wages and certainly not opposition to the 'consumer society' (it is at least distasteful of academics or students, who claim to be 'revolutionary', to tell workers that they consume too much - the capitalist entrepreneur already does this, not without success). The root cause is the hidden, slowly but surely emerging, *revolt of the people in the workplace against capital's command over machine and worker*. Making it clear to the workers that this is a revolt against capitalist relations of production, i.e. an anti-capitalist movement, and proceeding from this to the demand for workers' control that will lead to the formation of workers' councils, to the emergence of a dual power, meaning to a revolutionary situation: that is the central task of revolutionary socialists who have understood the strategy of transitional demands and its link with periodic waves of mass strikes.

The concrete starting points and historical examples are innumerable. [17] Workers are beginning to question the right of the bosses to close down companies, to send machinery elsewhere, to lay off workers (see the case of General Electric in Liverpool and at least two dozen cases of company occupations in France, Belgium and Italy in recent years). Workers deny the right of the boss to set or increase the speed of the assembly line and nullify it on their own initiative (Pirelli/Milan and Montecatini Edison in Porto Maghera, Italy). Workers question the right of factory owners to determine what will be produced, for whom (even in 'stable' United States comes the striking case of the protest by Black workers at Polaroid against the manufacture and sale of devices that facilitate the South African government's oppression of the African majority in that country).

Of course, one swallow does not make a summer, and one should not overestimate the extent of what has been achieved so far. These are still

only the first modest steps on a road that will lead through many disappointments and many failures to the goal: namely, that in one of the coming waves of mass strikes, the workers will not return to work in exchange for this or that percentage of wage increase or some social reform but will instead occupy the factories, elect strike committees and give these committees a controlling role in the economic life of workplaces, regions and economic bodies, i.e. create an objectively revolutionary situation. What makes these first modest examples so important is the fact that they are not more or less products of abstract speculation or historical memories but signs of an emerging tendency of the class struggle itself, of the class struggle as extended by the specific problems of late capitalism.

7. Two counter arguments

In left-wing circles, two counter arguments are frequently raised against this strategy, one from the right, the other (apparently) from the left.

The first accuses us of exchanging a formula that is supposedly clear and meaningful to workers - 'co-determination' - for one that 'sounds revolutionary but scares away the broader masses' - 'workers' control'. One must be content with demanding 'co-determination in the workplace', Fritz Vilmar suggests, [18] anything else would be an only verbally radical aberration.

As is well known, the actual co-determination proposals of the DGB (the West German trade union confederation), the social-democratic SPD and the Christian democratic CDU are far from Vilmar's formula. Vilmar's formulation is the aim of 'successfully fighting for laws, collective agreements and ad-hoc decisions that make initial decisions of management dependent on the workers and on their representatives, and enable those as well to demand decisions in the company'). These actual co-determination proposals entail the illusion of the right of veto over entrepreneurs' decisions, linked to a series of provisions that sharply curtail the defence of the workers

interests vis-à-vis the entrepreneurs: duty of labour peace; duty of consideration of so-called 'company interests'; 'duty of confidentiality', etc.

Even if there was a legally enshrined right of veto, allowing oneself to be imposed on and subjected to such restraints needs to be rejected. As long as there is an economic boom, the impression can exist that such restraints are merely 'formalities'. However, when lean years follow fat (such as the lean years 1966-67 in the German Federal Republic), immediately an intensifying conflict (e.g. the fight against dismissals) arises between wage-workers and the legally enshrined 'corporate interests'. The entrepreneur can at any time 'prove' that layoffs or a reduction of working hours are 'unfortunately unavoidable' in order to maintain the company's competitiveness.

The choice the works councils then face is either to renounce such restraining laws, or to go against their own class interests. Since not all will choose the same, the unity and fighting strength of union organization will suffer. And when the choice turns out badly, as it very often does, i.e. in favour of the law and against the class interests of the workforce, class solidarity and union organization are significantly weakened.

Such weakening does not take place more or less in exchange for actual additional rights, it takes place in exchange for crumbs from the table. Because even joint co-determination does not give workers' representatives a practical opportunity to exercise a veto against major strategic decisions by the entrepreneurs (in issues of 'social allowances', of course, this is not necessarily so, but these are simply not strategic decisions for the company or the business group).

First, workers representatives lack the data necessary. Works councils can only obtain this data by completely opening the company's books and correspondence, lifting banking secrecy and checking the accounts in the workplace to rectify manipulated or obscured data. [19] Workers representatives also lack actual social power. In a capitalist society, the economy functions under the incentive

of profit. Strategic decisions of entrepreneurs are determined by that same drive. Staff representatives can neither legitimize this without trampling on their own interests, nor neutralize it without powerful struggle and mobilization of the wage workers against the entrepreneurs' decisions. However, such a mobilization is severely hampered or even blocked if workers' representatives are bound to silence.

It is therefore not a pure war of words between the spokespersons of 'workplace participation' and those of 'worker control'. The nub of the disagreements can be summarized in the following five demands:

1. No signing of legal obligations to protect 'corporate interests'. For class-conscious workers, the guiding principle must be: not corporate profitability but class solidarity. In the market economy there exists an inevitable contradiction between the two. Either workers' representatives are in solidarity with 'their' company - at first in opposition to workers of other companies and finally against at least some of their own workplace colleagues - or they put aside 'company interests', i.e. its competitive interests, in order to maintain class solidarity among all wage workers.

2. A veto power over business decisions but no co-responsibility for company management. In capitalism, under the pressure of competition, management is condemned to clash with the interests of the workforce.

3. Full disclosure of what is discussed in the supervisory boards, i.e. open reporting by workers' representatives to general meetings of the workforce at the workplace, during working hours, on everything that has been discussed and all information that has come to light. Otherwise, the workers' representatives are manoeuvred into a situation where they turn into representatives of 'company interests' against their constituents.

4. Systematic refusal to take the data provided by the bosses as credible or as arguments for decisions that go against the interests of the workers. Systematic demands and propaganda

for the lifting of business secrecy and banking secrecy.

5. Focusing of the direct struggle on obtaining, in writing, a veto right of the workers over any acceleration of the assembly line, any change in the organization of work or wage settlement that does not correspond to the interests of the workers and intensifies exploitation and against all dismissals, widening of wage differences between workers of the same company, etc.

If one described these demands as 'co-determination in the workplace', it would be pointless to fight over words. But that leaves the difficulty of giving the official DGB proposals this content, rather than the one they currently have. Until this difficulty is resolved, it will only create confusion to use the same term for diametrically opposed projects.

It is of course no coincidence that the DGB proposals (not to mention those of the SPD) do not have this content. The DGB and SPD proposals come from social forces that want to mediate between and reconcile entrepreneurs and wage dependents, not fight for the class interests of wage dependents against those of the bosses. From the standpoint of class cooperation, one arrives at the conception of 'co-determination', from the standpoint of class struggle, one arrives at the conception of 'workers' control'. To use these concepts without making a distinction means to give the impression that there is no real difference between class cooperation and class struggle.

While Vilmar's criticism comes from the 'right', the criticism of certain student circles and organizations originating in the SDS (Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund) comes seemingly from the left: workers' control cannot be achieved without the fall of the bourgeois state, and the fall of the bourgeois state cannot be achieved without a revolutionary situation and revolutionary party (many add: without armed destruction of the bourgeois apparatus of repression). Hence, if one incites the workers to struggle for workers' control without clarifying all this to them and without warning them of

these obstacles in no uncertain terms, then one leads them to heavy defeats and even heavier disappointments.

The main error of the comrades arguing so consists in their building - pardon the pun - a Chinese wall between 'revolutionary' and 'non-revolutionary' conditions, between 'daily' demands for which one can fight in non-revolutionary times, and 'transitional' demands for which one can fight only in revolutionary times. We know our judgment will anger them. But in the end, all these scholastic, schematic distinctions turn out to be the good old 'tried and tested tactics' of pre-war social democracy, i.e. the reformist, revisionist practice of restricting oneself to immediate issues and leave the defence of 'higher interests' to abstract, literary propaganda.

Revisionists delight in the neat distinction between 'economic strike' and 'political strike'. They claim to know what are feasible and unrealistic demands for each of these cases: a straight line, now sixty years old, runs from Kautsky's polemic against Rosa Luxemburg's propaganda for mass strikes to Waldeck Rochet's polemic against the revolutionaries during the French May. This formalist argumentation removes the decisive moment, that of the movement, from analysis and strategy.

All those who understand that, in the age of imperialism and the 'actuality of revolution', it is not enough to 'wait' for the revolutionary situation to fall into one's lap like an apple from the tree know that what matters most is establishing how, through conscious action, one can stimulate and accelerate the transition from the non-revolutionary to the pre-revolutionary situation, from the purely economic to objectively political mass strikes, from purely trade unionist to socialist class consciousness. In solving this problem, scholastic hair-splitting about what would be 'unrealistic' and what would be 'semi-realistic' does not help us any further.

Certainly, one must include the objective and subjective relationships of force in the calculation. But this means neither considering these force relations as static, nor submitting

oneself to the given facts. One must start from general long-term development tendencies as they are clearly visible internationally. On the basis of the analysis of the objective contradictions of late capitalism, one must derive from these development trends certain general perspectives regarding the future attitude of the working class. Only when this has been accomplished can one take into account the specific national particularities of this or that imperialist country and not assume, for example, that there is any reason why the West German working class in the next 10 or 15 years would behave fundamentally differently from that of Britain (or of Belgium, France and Italy). When this analysis is made concrete, the 'weak links' of West German imperialism, its economy and society become visible. The question of under what circumstances a 'non-revolutionary' situation can be turned into a 'pre-revolutionary' one becomes much more concrete, and the incorrectness of a formula such as 'propaganda for workers' control should wait until day X' becomes clear.

Whether mass strikes remain 'purely economic' or become objectively political depends, among other things, in a decisive part on the consciousness of the most advanced workers (the informal leadership groups of the workforce), on the relative strength or weakness of a revolutionary vanguard organization, on the given degree of political interest and education of wider masses. That successful, sustained propaganda and recurring agitation for workers' control can change all these factors is clear.

Whether class consciousness is 'purely unionist' or 'semi-socialist' also depends, among other things, on whether it succeeds in breaking important layers of workers out of the false dilemma that counterposes an antagonistic, authoritarian state of the bosses to one of social-democratic class reconciliation and co-determination. And a gradually expanding and increasingly resounding campaign for workers' control (a campaign of propaganda, education and growing experience in practical struggle) can decisively contribute to escaping this false

choice, this dilemma, in which the vast majority of West German workers remain trapped to this day.

8. Comprehensive revolutionary praxis

One of the characteristics of a society that has fulfilled its historical tasks and is ripe for replacement is that not only the revolutionary class(es), those who will play the decisive role in the creation of a higher social order, but a majority of social strata of society no longer expect anything progressive from the old society. The revolutionary class - in non-revolutionary times mainly through the mediation of its politically active minority, the revolutionary vanguard organization - becomes the natural focus point of all progressive demands of the community as such.

For a long time it seemed as if this role, fulfilled classically by the revolutionary bourgeoisie of the early 19th century, would not be repeated in the case of the proletariat. However, in the case of revolution in relatively underdeveloped countries, the proletariat does have the chance to establish an alliance with the poor peasants by acting as the mouthpiece of the historical goals of the bourgeois-democratic revolution (agrarian revolution, national liberation), goals that are no longer attainable without the conquest of power by the proletariat.

However, when it comes to the achievement of purely socialist goals, this alliance narrows down to that of the semi-proletarian and proletarian strata, and at best one can hope to neutralize a part of the poorer independent peasant strata and win them over to socialism in protracted discussions. As for the imperialist countries of the West, in the time between the two world wars and even more so in the time of the 'cold war', it seemed as if almost all of the 'intermediate strata' would en bloc reject a socialist transformation of society.

Twenty years have passed and now the situation is moving in a much more favourable direction than one could have hoped for in the time between the First and Second World Wars. The

student revolt, which affected all imperialist countries and startled some of them, is only a sign of developments to come. More and more indications suggest that almost all strata of people who are wage-dependent but not part of the manual working class are becoming ripe for a global questioning of capitalist relations of production. The irony of this development lies in the fact that communist parties like that of France, which for years had based their tactics on an 'alliance with the middle strata' (and by that meant they meant the fundamentally conservative self-employed such as farmers, retailers, etc., whose economic direct interests often clash directly with those of the workers), are because of their own conservatism missing the chance of integrating these potentially revolutionary wage-dependent strata into a common struggle for socialism.

The social reasons that determine the change in attitude of the 'intermediate layers' - and in particular of those who do intellectual work, such as teachers, those in public services, office clerks, many technicians and engineers - are much like those that explain the student revolt: the growing industrialization of all non-industrial economic processes and superstructural activities, the increasing proletarianization of those working in such fields, and associated with this an increasing awareness of one's own alienation and growing sensitivity to the irrational and inhuman aspects of late capitalism, if not an intensifying rejection of late capitalism as such. This is certainly not a uniform process, and certainly some strata are by their objective function as direct accomplices of capitalist exploitation condemned to identify with the existing social order. Moreover, this is an incipient tendency that has progressed much further in France and Italy (as far as teachers, public service workers and academics are concerned, for example) than in Britain or the German Federal Republic. But again, it is important to recognize the general historical tendency towards the increasing socio-economic homogeneity of the wage-dependent masses and not - as numerous bourgeois and pseudo-Marxist sociologists claim - towards their

increasing differentiation.

The potential incorporation of growing social strata into a common anti-capitalist front raises a series of strategic and tactical problems. Such questions are only now beginning to become clear but their resolution is essential not only for the elaboration of an effective socialist strategy, one corresponding to late-capitalist conditions, but also for building an adequate revolutionary organization.

It is possible that at points in the past anti-capitalist consciousness and a willingness to act accordingly existed more broadly among other social strata than they did among industrial workers. This should not surprise us as this has been shown repeatedly in the past. From the fact that the working class forms the only social class historically capable of overcoming capitalism does not follow that it is always and everywhere capable of doing so. Even less does it follow that it is always and everywhere aware of it. In some special situations (which, for example, characterize the German Federal Republic in the years 1967-68 and the United States today), it would be completely inappropriate to turn one's back on the real anti-capitalist mass movements on the pretext that the working class does not (yet) participate in them en masse. The point is to consistently drive these mass movements forward and influence them as effectively as possible. This is necessary not only so as not to miss the opportunity for the formation of numerous revolutionary cadres, but also to use the exemplary nature of these revolutionary dynamics as an important, indeed indispensable, pedagogical tool for the revival of the political workers' movement and to deepen the objective weakening of bourgeois society through such mass movements.

By giving such support Marxists can influence a progressive mass movement that did not arise among industrial workers and give it an anti-capitalist direction, but this is possible only if its own particular character is recognized. The importance of the movement's programmatic demands and its specific forms of struggle need to be recognized. In other words, one

should not reductively see such movement as 'merely petty-bourgeois democratic'. All such movements raise social problems that seriously endanger the capitalist mode of production and create additional points of crisis for the bourgeois state and are not limited to 'anti-monopoly' struggles.

When students attack not only the authoritarian form but also the alienating content of university education - subject as it is to the profit-seeking of big business - and when they demand self-government and self-management of the university; when women demand free, permanently accessible homes for children and kindergartens, as in the American women's movement; when consumers protest against the continued neglect and increasing cost of public transport and demand free transport (as in Paris and in the 'Red Dot' actions in the German Federal Republic); when socialist doctors or socialist health personnel denounce the scandal of commercialized medical care and fight for the principle of needs coverage in health care; when people come out against land speculation and rent usury, no longer by demanding wage adjustments but by demanding the socialization of building land: then a socialist, anti-capitalist consciousness is spreading in ever wider layers and the stability and continuity of bourgeois society is endangered. These examples concern, without exception, essential features of a bourgeois society that is built on generalized commodity production and the reification of all human relations.

Certainly, these demands cannot in the long run be realized without the fall of the capitalist mode of production, i.e. without a revolutionary mass mobilization of the working class. But this says nothing about the role that the struggle for such transitional demands can play in preparing such a mobilization. For Lenin, it was the alpha and omega of revolutionary politics that only a revolutionary practice aimed at transforming society as a whole can lead to the revolutionary goal. The proletariat cannot gain political class consciousness as long as it occupies itself only with its immediate concerns

and problems, as long as it has not grasped the dynamics and attitudes of all social classes and strata. The 'ideal' condition is undoubtedly that which Western social democracy reached roughly between 1890 and 1910, when the great political activity of the working class and its organizations made it the natural centralizing factor of all mass movements. If such a state of affairs is not yet present, it will certainly not be brought closer by turning one's back on mass movements or by withdrawing from the task of leading these movements into an anti-capitalist direction with platitudes such as 'You can't achieve anything anyway as long as the workers don't get moving', 'We need to have an absolute priority for work in the proletarian milieu', 'In the end they will be integrated into bourgeois society anyway', etc. Such a practice will only reinforce the innate economism of the unconscious working class and, instead of contributing to its politicization, will aid the bourgeoisie and the trade union bureaucracy in further depoliticizing workers and help restrict their attention to bread and butter issues.

All the more so if such mass movements raise issues that correspond to the new needs arising from the development of the productive forces, issues that affect the broad mass of the working population as well. Not only students, revolutionary intelligentsia, housewives and socialist doctors but a growing proportion of workers are increasingly aware of these new needs and are interested in solving them. As soon as the student problem is no longer seen as a 'student problem' but as a special form of the general problem of the education sector, this applies even to this most difficult case.

The main issue is mass action and mass mobilization to unleash the dynamics of self-activity and collective activity. That this creates examples that appeal to workers was unequivocally proven by certain forms of struggle (demonstration forms) that were invented by the student movement and were adopted in the 'wildcat strikes' all over Europe (including the German Federal

Republic).

9. The international dimension

In imperialist countries the crisis of capitalist relations of production is also manifest in the crisis of the bourgeois nation state. We have analysed elsewhere [20] the causes and manifestations of this crisis. The productive forces have long broken through the narrow framework of the nation state. With current technology, there are numerous products that can only be profitably manufactured if there is no more than one production site for an entire continent (in the case of certain expensive and rather infrequently used drugs, even the North American market has become too small for profitable production). The concentration and centralization of capital is increasingly taking on an international character. We have entered an era in which control of the global market by several dozen multinational groups is a realistic prospect. [21]

The growing internationalization of capital ownership and of economic life leads to an increasing internationalization of the 'objective' class struggle. The traditional workers' movement has failed as lamentably in understanding (not to mention applying) the strategy of transitional demands as in responding to the new needs arising from the growth of the productive forces. Meanwhile, the inability of the of the trade union bureaucracy and of the social-democratic and communist party apparatuses to counter the international strategies of big business has severely weakened numerous strikes, if not condemned them to defeat (the French miners' strike, the Limburg miners' strike in Belgium, the British sailors' strike). In early 1971, we saw how the economic impact of the strike by British postal workers was significantly weakened as millions of postal items were brought to Irish, Belgian French and Dutch port cities from Britain by private intermediaries. There, they were delivered by unionized colleagues without the relevant unions worrying that they were blatantly strikebreaking.

Overcoming the compartmentalization of the workers and of the

revolutionary intelligentsia in different nation states is necessary not only on defensive grounds. It is also of increasing importance for offensive struggles. In the wave of anti-capitalist class struggles in Europe since 1967-68, many radical experiments have been undertaken by sections of workers, of students, of revolutionary intelligentsia, both in terms of the demands of the struggle and in terms of the organizational forms and methods of struggle. Such experiments are of the utmost significance for the entire European proletariat but do not reach wider dissemination due to national, regional and often even local isolation of comrades. At the November 1970 Brussels conference for a Red Europe [22], the slogan of turning the uneven development of class consciousness in Europe into a combined development was formulated. It is about ensuring that the compartmentalization and fragmentation of class consciousness, organized by the bourgeois mass media and by the bureaucratic apparatuses, is broken through and that every radical experience of struggle of the entire workers' vanguard, of the entire mass of struggling workers can be spread on a European scale. That this must be a matter not only of incorporating experiences but that such lessons must also have a practical, radicalizing influence on future struggles speaks for itself.

But to limit oneself to this aspect of the international character of socialist strategy would again mean to adapt oneself to the existing (and evidently insufficient) state of class consciousness, to follow the rearguard and limit oneself to economic demands. It would mean abdicating the educational and radicalizing tasks of the vanguard. Again, the radical student movement and the revolutionary vanguard organizations achieved a great deal by making the task of solidarity with the revolutions in the colonies and semi-colonies a daily practical issue, not just one of providing information. The failure of social democracy and the communist parties to stay true to their own traditions (those of social democracy before the First World War, those of the communist parties of the 1920s)

created a space that was successfully filled by the youth vanguard. Certainly, for many it is an escape from the duty to build revolutionary consciousness and organization in their own country and among their own working class. Instead they are exclusively concerned with solidarity with the Vietnamese, Cuban, Palestinian, Latin American, etc. revolutions. But underestimating the need to support such solidarity, autonomously from the ongoing routine of class struggle at home, is

misunderstanding the very essence of revolutionary Marxism in the imperialist era.

This applies not only to solidarity with the liberation struggles of oppressed peoples. It applies equally to the no less necessary solidarity with the anti-bureaucratic struggles in the bureaucratized workers states of the Eastern Bloc. It applies equally to the increasingly important coordination of the class struggle of the European with that of the Japanese and North American proletariat. But such tasks

cannot be left to the random ups and downs of mass or vanguard spontaneity. They require an international revolutionary vanguard organization, just as the effective elaboration and application of a socialist strategy in the national framework requires a national revolutionary organization. What have already formulated what needs to be said on the question of organization after a century of experience and we therefore prefer not to repeat it here. [23]

Ernest Mandel Was One of the 20th Century's Greatest Marxist Thinkers

26 October 2023, by Alex de Jong

The Belgian socialist intellectual and activist Ernest Mandel was born one hundred years ago today on April 5, 1923. Mandel was a tireless agitator and scholar who wrote some of the most significant works of Marxist theory during the second half of the twentieth century.

Mandel is perhaps best remembered today for his book *Late Capitalism*, which popularized a now familiar term. The critic Fredric Jameson drew heavily upon Mandel's economic writings in his theorization of postmodernism, and "late capitalism" has become a journalistic cliché for cultural analysis.

Mandel himself, who once wrote a social history of crime novels, might have smiled at this curious appropriation of his work. But his overriding goal was to challenge the power structures of capitalism rather than analyze its cultural side effects.

He remained faithful to that goal from his teenage years as a wartime resistance fighter who survived the Nazi prison system to his final days in the neoliberal wasteland of the 1990s. Mandel's political life and work can be an important source of inspiration for

the new socialist movement of today.

Resisting Nazism

Mandel was born to a family of assimilated Polish Jews of German background in the Belgian city of Antwerp. His father, Henri Mandel, had left-wing sympathies — specifically with the ideas of Leon Trotsky. During the 1930s, after the Nazis came to power in Germany, the Mandel house became a meeting place for left-wing refugees. Listening to such refugees discuss socialism, the latest developments in the Soviet Union, and the rise of fascism, the young Ernest received an early introduction to radical politics.

In May 1940, the war came to Belgium as Nazi Germany invaded the country. Large parts of the established left were unable to respond to the new situation. Many leaders of the social democratic Belgian Labour Party and the trade unions fled the country, while former Labour Party leader Hendrik de Man called for collaboration with the occupiers.

The Soviet-German nonaggression pact was still in force at the time, and

the Belgian Communists proclaimed a stance of the "purest and most complete neutrality." Weeks after the Nazi invasion began, an assassin working on Soviet orders murdered Trotsky in his Mexican exile.

Amid this disarray, a group of independent leftists set out to publish the first underground Flemish-language newspaper, which was produced in the Mandel home. Ernest and his father wrote many of the articles in the paper. In August 1942, Ernest went underground. At the end of that year, he was arrested but managed to escape while being transported.

According to Mandel's biographer Jan Willem Stutje, Henri Mandel paid a ransom for his son's release. Ernest's "daring flight" might well have been "staged by agents anxious to avoid being questioned." According to Stutje, Mandel's escape left him with a sense of guilt.

Undeterred, Mandel continued his resistance activities. By this time, he had become a member of the Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP). In early 1944, the RCP produced a bilingual pamphlet about

contacts between German and US corporations that directly addressed the German soldiers: "You are being sacrificed as cannon fodder while your masters negotiate to save their possessions." On March 28, 1944, while distributing the pamphlet, Mandel was again arrested.

Having been arrested for his resistance activities rather than because he was Jewish, Mandel was sent to different prisons and work camps, at one point being forced to work in a chemicals factory of IG Farben. As a resistance member, a Jew, and a Trotskyist who was despised by his Stalinist fellow prisoners, his chances of survival were slim.

Mandel later recalled that pure luck was one reason he managed to pull through. But he also credited his success in establishing ties with some of the German prison warders who had been supporters of the Social Democratic party before the Nazis took power: "That was the intelligent thing to do, even from the point of view of self-preservation." The harsh conditions took their toll and Mandel was hospitalized in early 1945. On March 25, 1945, US forces liberated the camp in which he was being held.

Trotskyism After Trotsky

Although Mandel's direct family members survived the war, his grandmother, aunt, and uncle were all killed in Auschwitz, along with their families. Henri Mandel dreamt of an academic career for his son, but Ernest had other priorities. He wanted to continue the struggle against capitalism, the system that had produced the horrors of Nazism and the war. Throughout his life, the experience of fascism remained a political and moral reference point for Mandel.

Leon Trotsky and his supporters had founded the Fourth International (FI) in 1938. Trotsky expected that the test of the coming war would discredit the Stalinist Communist Parties and hoped that the FI would develop into an alternative. However, the important

role of the Soviet Union in defeating Nazi Germany and the participation of communists in Europe's resistance movements brought those parties unprecedented prestige and popularity, leaving their rivals on the radical wing of the workers' movement with limited opportunities for growth.

"Throughout his life, the experience of fascism remained a political and moral reference point for Mandel."

Meanwhile, war and repression had decimated the small groups associated with the FI. Mandel felt that it was his duty to help build the Trotskyist movement and became a leading activist in its ranks. In part, he was driven by the memory of comrades who the Nazis had killed, such as his close friend Abram Leon, the author of an important study of Jewish history and antisemitism.

Like many radicals, Mandel thought that the war would be the prelude to a wave of revolutions in Europe, as had been the case with World War I. The program Trotsky drafted for the FI in 1938 asserted that capitalism had run aground:

Mankind's productive forces stagnate. Already new inventions and improvements fail to raise the level of material wealth. Conjunctural crises under the conditions of the social crisis of the whole capitalist system inflict ever heavier deprivations and sufferings upon the masses.

Gradually, Mandel came to recognize that the system would not only continue to function, but was even able to develop further, entering into a long period of economic growth after 1945. Under these conditions, he joined the Belgian Socialist Party, keeping his Trotskyist identity secret, and help found the weekly *La Gauche* (The Left), a paper that became influential on the socialist left in Belgium.

In this period, Mandel came into his own as a socialist theoretician and leader. In 1962, he published his first

major work, *Marxist Economic Theory*. The book gave a systematic presentation of its topic, attempting to prove that one could "reconstitute the whole economic system of Karl Marx" by drawing upon "the scientific data of contemporary science."

In the introduction to the book, Mandel described his approach as "genetico-evolutionary," by which he meant that he was engaged in study of the origin and evolution of his topic. "Marxist economic theory," he wrote, ought to be regarded as "a summation of a method, of the results obtained by using this method, and of results which are continually subject to re-examination." The combination of history and theory, continuously trying to integrate new findings, would be characteristic of Mandel's work.

Structural Reforms and Socialist Strategy

While working on *Marxist Economic Theory*, a book that ran to almost eight hundred pages in its English translation, Mandel developed a strategy of "anti-capitalist structural reforms" as part of the circle around *La Gauche*. By this he meant reforms that would not introduce socialism in themselves but would nonetheless represent steps toward it and "give the working class the ability to decisively weaken big capital."

For Mandel, possible anti-capitalist structural reforms in Belgium included the organization of a planning bureau that would guarantee full employment, public control over major corporations, and nationalization of the energy sector. He emphasized that economic reforms could not be separated from the issue of political power.

Mandel was attempting to formulate a socialist strategy that might be suitable for a highly developed capitalist country like Belgium. One source of inspiration for this effort was the Belgian general strike of winter 1960 against a series of reforms proposed by the right-wing government. Lasting several weeks,

the strike involved hundreds of thousands of workers. The French strikes and factory occupations of June 1936, after the left-wing Popular Front came to power, were another example cited by Mandel.

During the postwar period of economic growth, living conditions had improved for many, but struggles like the Belgian general strike showed that capitalist development had not fully pacified the working class. For Mandel, the most powerful weapons of the workers in the struggle against capitalism were organization, political education, and an awareness of their essential economic role.

He recognized that workers' struggles did not simply revolve around economic conditions but were also driven by resistance to alienating and oppressive work practices. Even relatively well-off workers experienced alienation and domination at the workplace. In a balance sheet of the 1960 strike, Mandel wrote that the working-class struggle against capitalism "differs from social struggles in the past in that it is not only a fight for essential, immediate interests." That struggle could become a "conscious fight to restructure society."

Mandel argued that the Belgian strike was a lost opportunity because there had been no political leadership to propose such a restructuring. For revolutionary change to come about, it was necessary to extend the struggle for economic reforms to the question of political power.

For Mandel, the struggle could only be victorious if "the opponent was confronted not only in the factories but also in the streets." History had shown, he insisted, the need to establish a revolutionary party that would "tirelessly explain" to working people that it was necessary to seize economic as well as political power in order to achieve their goals.

Dynamics of Late Capitalism

During the 1960s, Mandel developed his understanding of how capitalism

worked a century after Marx had published *Capital*. He initially used the term "neo-capitalism" before settling on "late capitalism." The 1972 book of that title was Mandel's magnum opus.

In *Late Capitalism*, he attempted to "provide a Marxist explanation of the causes of the long post-war wave of rapid growth." According to Mandel, this period of growth also had "inherent limits" that ensured it would give way to "another long wave of increasing social and economic crisis for world capitalism, characterized by a far lower rate of overall growth." He correctly predicted the end of the postwar boom in the mid 1970s.

Mandel considered stepped-up rates of technological innovation to be one of the characteristics of late capitalism. This shortened the lifespan of fixed capital and resulted in an increased need for large firms to engage in planning. There was also government intervention in the economy on an unprecedented scale to avoid breakdowns like the 1929 Wall Street Crash. As Mandel observed in 1964: "The State now guarantees, directly and indirectly, private profit in ways that range from concealed subsidies to the 'nationalization of losses.'"

However, every attempt by capitalism to overcome its contradictions presented it with new problems. Backed by governments, banks extended cheap credit to corporations, enabling rapid growth but also leading to inflation. Such inflation damaged the major long-term investments that were central to competition between the big, capital-intensive firms.

In turn, attempts to fight inflation created problems of their own, throttling economic growth. State intervention in the economy might be useful in avoiding catastrophic crises and guaranteeing profits. But it also made it clear to everyone that "the economy" was not a natural given.

Revolutionary Horizons

Mandel wagered on the possibility of revolutionary change resulting from such contradictions. Explosions such as the Belgian general strike and the Greek Apostasia crisis of 1965 presented him with a classic Marxist

dilemma. If it was true, as Marx had insisted, that "the dominant ideology of every society is the ideology of the dominant class," then how could the working class liberate itself?

Mandel recognized that the dominance of ruling-class ideology had deeper roots than "ideological manipulation" through the mass media, the school system, etc. This dominance drew strength from the daily workings of capitalism in which working people were forced to compete with each other and had to depend on the sale of their labor power.

Yet the inevitable contradictions and crises of capitalism that resulted from competition between the dominant monopolies also led to fissures in the ruling consensus. The central question for socialists was how to go beyond the outbursts of discontent that were the unavoidable result of economic turbulence. To move from defensive struggles against attacks on living conditions and wages to demands for workers' power required a "conscious leap."

In an influential text about the need for socialist organization, Mandel developed his ideas on what would make such a leap possible. He distinguished between three groups: the mass of the working class; a vanguard of that class consisting of activist workers; and the members of revolutionary organizations. The third category partially overlapped with the second.

In Mandel's framework, the "vanguard" was not a self-declared elite but rather the most committed and energetic activists of the working class. Building a revolutionary movement meant winning such activist workers over to socialist ideas. This would provide them with organization and prevent their withdrawal from political activism during the inevitable ebb of immediate social struggles.

Radical change would be possible only during waves of unrest, when the contradictions of capitalism generated mass anger and protest. During such periods, a revolutionary party should attempt to draw ever larger groups of

people into political action and propose anti-capitalist demands.

Mandel saw revolution as a process of interaction between organized action and spontaneous movements in which working people would inevitably organize themselves in different groups. This cut across a stereotypical divide between organization and spontaneity that was respectively associated with the figures of Vladimir Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg on the Marxist left. Half-jokingly, Mandel called himself “a Leninist with Luxemburgian deviations.”

A Bridge Between Generations

The 1960s and early '70s were turbulent times during which Mandel was extraordinarily productive, as if carried along by the rising tide of class struggle. Along with *Late Capitalism*, the other books he published in those years included a study of the contradictions between US and European capitalism, a scholarly text on *The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx*, a critique of the Eurocommunist tendency among the West European Communist Parties, and an examination of the cycles of boom and slump in the history of capitalism, *Long Waves of Capitalist Development*. During his life, Mandel published over two dozen books and hundreds of articles.

At the same time, Mandel was a tireless agitator and debater. In 1964, he was invited to Cuba to participate in debates over socialist planning. Che Guevara had read *Marxist Economic Theory* with great interest and held extensive discussions with Mandel.

For his part, Mandel was greatly impressed with the Argentine revolutionary leader. When the Bolivian army captured and summarily executed Guevara in 1967 as he was trying to launch a campaign of guerrilla warfare, Mandel published a passionate tribute to “a great friend, an exemplary comrade, a heroic militant.”

The governments of capitalist states

found Mandel to be an unwelcome presence on their territory. In 1969, the US authorities denied him entry in a case that the Supreme Court’s conservative majority later cited as a precedent to justify Donald Trump’s “Muslim ban.” A few years later, the West German government intervened to block Mandel’s appointment at the Freie Universität Berlin and had him deported from the country.

France was another country that banned Mandel from its soil. In May 1968, he was invited to speak at meetings of the Revolutionary Communist Youth (JCR), a radical group that had moved toward the Fourth International. The JCR was heavily involved in the riots and protests of May '68.

In what must have been a satisfying opportunity to engage in some practical activity, Mandel helped build barricades in the Paris Latin Quarter during the “*night of the barricades*.” The car in which he had come to Paris was destroyed during the street fighting. A reporter overheard Mandel exclaim “How beautiful! It’s the revolution!”

For the new generation of revolutionaries, Mandel was a link to revolutionary history and experience. Daniel Bensaïd, a leader of the JCR, recalled how Mandel helped them to discover “an open, cosmopolitan and militant Marxism.” For these young radicals, according to Bensaïd, Mandel was “a tutor in theory” and a bridge between generations — someone who made people think, rather than thinking for them.

Mandel had strong pedagogical skills, practiced in countless meetings with workers, trade unionists, student radicals, and revolutionary activists. His 1967 pamphlet, “An Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory,” became a widely read classic.

Socialism or Barbarism

There is something tragic in the fact that Mandel, who had fought so hard for socialist change, passed away in 1995, when neoliberal hegemony was

at its height. Mandel had difficulty adapting to the decline of social struggles from the late '70s on.

Looking back in the new century on a popular introduction to Marxism that Mandel had published in 1974, Bensaïd argued that its optimistic political analysis about the prospects for socialism drew upon Mandel’s “sociological confidence in the growing extension, homogeneity, and maturity of the proletariat as a whole.” According to Bensaïd, this confidence “transformed into an irreversible historic tendency the specific situation created by post-war industrial capitalism and its specific mode of regulation.” Yet the neoliberal offensive of the 1980s sent this process into reverse, undermining the forces of organized labor:

Far from being irreversible, the tendency to homogenisation was undermined by the policies of dispersal of work units, intensification of competition on the world labour market, individualisation of wages and labour time, privatisation of leisure and lifestyles, the methodical demolition of social solidarity and protection. In other words, far from being a mechanical consequence of capitalist development, the rallying of the forces of resistance and subversion of the order established by capital is an incessant task recommenced in daily struggles, and whose results are never definitive.

Later in his life, Mandel’s exuberant optimism was combined with warnings against the long-term effects of capitalism. The historical choice was barbarism or socialism, he insisted, and a socialist outcome was not guaranteed.

During this period, Mandel returned to the study of capitalist barbarism as expressed in *World War II* and the *crimes of Nazism*. Although he remained a lifelong admirer of Trotsky, he reevaluated some of his earlier judgments, becoming more critical of Trotsky’s practices during

his “dark years” in the early 1920s when, as Mandel saw it, “the strategy of Bolshevik leadership hindered rather than promoted the self-activity of workers.”

Mandel took pride in situating himself within what he considered the essential tradition of the Enlightenment — the striving for human emancipation and self-determination. Although he did not like the term, there was, as Manuel Kellner has **observed**, a utopian dimension to Mandel’s thought. This was utopianism in the best sense of the word: faith that society can be remade, by human action, into something much better.

The crisis of socialism and communism was in the eyes of Mandel first of all a crisis of this belief. “The principal task of socialists and communists,” he wrote shortly before his death, “is to restore the credibility of socialism in the consciousness of millions.” He described the goals of socialism in “near biblical terms”:

Eliminate hunger, clothe the naked, give a dignified life to everyone, save the lives of those who die for lack of proper medical attention, generalise free access to culture including the elimination of illiteracy, universalise democratic freedoms, human rights, and

eliminate repressive violence in all its forms.

For Mandel, the hope for such a future was based on the spark of rebellion that had always made people rebel against oppressive and alienating conditions. The task of socialists was to fan that spark into a flame by supporting all such rebellions and by presenting an alternative way forward.

That task has not changed. In a different historical period, Mandel’s legacy of writing and activism can help us in the search for a new path.

Source [Jacobin](#).

Ernest Mandel’s ‘Introduction to Marxist Theory’

8 October 2021, by [Ian Parker](#)

So, it wasn’t the death of capitalism that brought us together again but the death of Ernest Mandel. Fragments of the old International Marxist Group, British Section of the Fourth International of which Mandel was the most well known activist intellectual and leader, gathered at Congress House in London in October 1995 for a fairly small meeting to commemorate Mandel’s life. Mandel, who had died in July that year, embodied the modern project to understand and change the world. All those involved with radical research and political practice have much to learn from this, particularly at a time when so many of us are drowning in ideological claims that everything is fake, that there is nothing to be understood, nothing to be changed, and especially nothing to be found in the depth of an individual’s struggle and commitment to society. There is a sense of something changing in society now, and even if this is not the end of history it appears to many to be the end of a particular era of optimism and struggle. No doubt members of

the Workers Revolutionary Party felt much the same when Gerry Healy died, and for members of the Socialist Workers Party it was a sad day when they lost Tony Cliff.

One of the speakers at the Mandel commemorative meeting in London referred, I think with no pun intended, to those who had joined the Fourth International in the 1960s and 1970s as ‘the Ernest generation’, and wondered aloud about the prospects of attracting youth to the organization at a time when prospects for change seem so grim. Examples of successful challenge and revolution which were so abundant at that time are so rare now, and it is as if all the television and radio reviews of the history of the twentieth century function not so much to remind us of where we come from as separate us from times that seem so completely different. The story was told of thousands of German youth transfixed by Mandel speaking in Berlin in 1968 and their comment that ‘he is our past, our good past’. What is the connection? Who was he?

Why should we know? Why mustn’t we forget it now?

Ernest Mandel was born in 1923 into a working-class Jewish family that settled in Antwerp. When the Nazis invaded Belgium, Mandel was involved with Belgian and German-exile revolutionary communists, Trotskyists who were members of Sections of the Fourth International. The disastrous policies of the Communist Party in Germany followed the twists and turns of Stalin’s diplomatic ambitions with different Western powers, and included at different moments ultra-Left condemnation of erstwhile social-democratic allies as ‘social fascists’ and Rightist reassurance of supporters that it was simply going to be a case of ‘after Hitler, us’. The abject failure of these policies together with the increasing terror in the Soviet Union led Trotsky to argue that a new revolutionary International was needed. Now Mandel age 16 was part of the ‘Fourth’, and active in distributing leaflets to the German soldiers. He was arrested, and held in

a camp. He argued with the guards, discovered they were members of the social-democratic and communist parties, continued the argument, and they facilitated his escape.

This oft-told story is part of a particular strategy of resistance which carries with it particular notions of humanity, rationality and solidarity. The Fourth International itself holds within it, as a condition of its very existence, the idea that it is possible to create a sense of community which breaks national boundaries and racist divisions. Unlike the other French and Belgian prisoners who simply reversed contempt and treated the German warders as less than human, Mandel appealed to common interests and common history. There is more at stake here than being nice to others. The building of alliances in this Marxist tradition does rest on a deep historically-grounded humanism, but it is also wedded to a rationalist ethos, to the notion that it is possible to argue to persuade, and that one can participate in an argument and be persuaded. When Mandel addressed German students he addressed them as an audience that could be persuaded. He was made Professor at the Free University in Berlin, but he was banned from West Germany, and could not take up the chair. There is something very dangerous to those in power about someone who speaks across boundaries, and he was also barred from entering France, Switzerland, Australia and the United States.

Some readers will know of Mandel through his writings on Trotskyism (Trotsky as Alternative, Revolutionary Marxism Today, Stalinism and Eurocommunism) or on economic theory (Marxist Economic Theory, The Second Slump, The Long Waves of Capitalist Development). In some parts of the world, such as Mexico, his main influence was as an activist while in other parts, such as Germany, it was as a theorist. While he was not racing from meeting to meeting around the world, whether internal meetings and 'cadre schools' of the

Fourth International or public rallies, he was reading about crime and writing about it. His last, uncompleted, project was on crime. He had already written a study of the crime novel, *Delightful Murder*, and the ways in which capitalism rests on crime, encourages and represses crime, the way it evokes the horror of crime at the very moment that it requires it to make its own processes of exploitation possible. Here was an analysis of the appeal that right-wing demagogues make to our anxiety about crime, the fascination that crime has for people brought up in a capitalist society, and the underlying economic conditions that make this anxiety and fascination inevitable in this particular system.

One of Mandel's major contributions was in Marxist economic theory, and in the careful analysis of material underlying structural conditions for the things that appear to us, on the surface. In particular, Mandel provided an account of the development of what he called 'late capitalism', which is the economic infrastructure for what some saw as the 'postmodern condition' in culture. Mandel's account in *Late Capitalism* of the 'third industrial revolution' in electronic and information technology and the growth of the service sector after the second World War explains how it should have come about that so many people feel that they have lost touch with production, that they feel they produce nothing worthwhile and feel as if their lives can be given only transitory meaning by the activity of consumption. Unlike those who revel in this loss of the grand narratives of science, progress and personal meaning in the West, however, Mandel was able to describe these economic changes in the context of an analysis of exploitation and alienation, and of suffering and resistance on a global scale.

In Eastern Europe in the 1970s Mandel's writings on self-management as an alternative to bureaucratic control were popular amongst

dissidents, and one of his last major studies, *Power and Money*, was on the way in which the bureaucracy in the post-capitalist transitional regimes emerged and the way it reproduced itself. The bureaucracy is a distinct social layer which substitutes itself for the self-activity of the population. It works on the assumption that since people cannot think for themselves, it must do the thinking for them. For Mandel, the conflict in the former Soviet Union, and in China now, was always a 'three-cornered fight' between the people, the bureaucracy and the restoration of capitalism. Mandel was convinced that the uprising against the bureaucracy would replace it with a democratic socialist regime, and this is reflected in his writing on the developing crisis of the bureaucracy in *Beyond Perestroika*.

The hopes of Trotskyists have always lay with a political revolution in the police states which masquerade as progressive alternatives to capitalism to accompany a socialist revolution against the 'free market' systems which actually continually suppress free exchange and free association. Mandel's main fault, several speakers at the commemorative meeting claimed, was over-optimism. But he left us with writing on the history and economic grounding of capitalism, analyses of bureaucracy and alienation, and an account of the underlying structural preconditions for the world we live in today. His writings are an invaluable resource for Fourth Internationalists in Britain, including those working in Anti-Capitalist Resistance and other organizations, and for many other kindred groups around the world. His work still helps us to understand something of where we are and what we might want to be. The fact that he wrote and struggled for a lifetime and left so much of value, is grounds for some optimism, and an example, perhaps, of what a committed and engaged life might be.

You can order the volume from [Resistance Books](#) here.

1990: The assassination of Trotsky

28 August 2020, by **Ernest Mandel**

He claimed to be Belgian and that his name was Jacques Mornard. He was Catalan and his name was Ramon Mercader, Stalin guided his arm. On 22 August 1940, a mountaineer's ice pick smashed the skull of Leon Trotsky, a refugee in Mexico since 1937. The murderer told the police that his name was Jacques Mornard and that he was a Belgian citizen. Author of the assassination, he was not the only organizer. Thanks to his affair with the young Trotskyist Sylvia Ageloff, Trotsky's future assassin had succeeded in winning the confidence of those who watched over the safety of the famous exile. Under the name of Franck Jacson, he was received several times in the fortified house in Coyoacan (a suburb of Mexico City).

A few months before the assassination, a first attempt had failed. On 24 May 1940, at 4 a.m., a commando group of twenty men had managed to enter the house: for several minutes, they sprayed Trotsky's room with submachine guns and threw two incendiary grenades as well as a time bomb. Miraculously, there were no deaths or injuries. Trotsky and his wife threw themselves under the bed, their grandson Sieva did the same.

Who was Jacson? The Stalinist press was unleashed and spread the thesis that he had mounted the attack to attract attention and slander the Mexican Communist Party and Stalin. A month after the events, thirty people were behind bars, most of them CP members and former veterans of the Spanish Civil War. The person in charge was on the run: it was the famous painter David Alfaro Siqueiros, a former colonel in Spain, whom Trotsky believed had served the GPU since 1928. Subsequently, the investigation showed that Siqueiros and Franck Jacson had known each other since Spain.

The identity of Franck Jacson

Who was this Franck Jacson? It would take nearly ten years to unravel his true identity. In his pocket was a letter explaining the motives for his act: a disillusioned Trotskyist, he had become disgusted by the man and by his proposal to send him to the USSR to carry out sabotage, demoralize the Red Army and try to kill Stalin. To accomplish all of this he would have the support of a great power (it was the United States, for Trotsky could no longer be an agent of Hitler due to the German-Soviet Pact).

All these accusations were taken up by the various CPs for nearly forty years. In 1969, French Communist Party leader Léo Figuères used them again, in his book *Le Trotskysme, cet anti-léninisme*. When the photos of the murderer appeared in the press, several veterans of Spain (many had taken refuge in Mexico) thought they recognized the Communist militant Ramon Mercader. However, it was not until 1950 that we could be absolutely certain: taking advantage of a congress in Europe, a Mexican government criminologist went to Spain to investigate. He compared Jacson's fingerprints with those of the young Catalan Communist Ramon Mercader, arrested in June 1935: they were the same.

In 1953, the year of Stalin's death, on all official records, the name Mercader replaced that of Jacson-Mornard. The assassin's mother, Caridad Mercader, was a prominent activist in the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia, attached to the Comintern. She was recruited for the GPU by Gerö, the future Hungarian Stalinist leader who then officiated in Spain. Through him, she became the mistress of GPU general Leonid Eitingon, a specialist in the liquidation

of suspect Soviet diplomats and dubious militants. Ramon Mercader served a 20-year prison sentence in Mexico, the maximum legally permitted. Upon release, in 1960, he went to Czechoslovakia via Cuba, then to Moscow where he had been made a "hero of the Soviet Union" and holder of the "Order of Lenin". He was buried in Moscow in 1978 without ever having spoken.

Stalin's order

Stalin's authorship of the crime is now recognized by everyone, including the Soviets and the PCF. In 1978, Valentin Campa, former leader of the Mexican Communist Party, published his memoirs. He had been expelled in 1940 because he did not show enough enthusiasm in his party's involvement in the preparations for the assassination. In 1978 *L'Humanité* published a few extracts in which Campa confirms that it was indeed Stalin who gave the order to kill Trotsky. But he did not reveal anything that is not already known: in particular, he does not say who was the main organizer. Ironically, the old Stalinist Georges Fournial was responsible for presenting the document. However, as early as February 1938, Fournial had been denounced by the Trotskyist press as an agent of the GPU, having just obtained a six-month leave to go to Mexico to represent the Teaching Workers' International.

Despite everything, thanks to Valentin Campa, the old militants were able to learn, thirty-eight years late, that their beloved leaders were not only liars but also murderers. Of quite another interest will be the book on Trotsky which is about to be released in Moscow by General Volkogonov, director of the Institute of Military History of the USSR and recent biographer of Stalin. Interviewed by the *Stampa* correspondent (26 July

1990), he claims to have had access to numerous archives including those of Trotsky, Stalin and the NKVD. He claims to have the richest collection of documents concerning Trotsky: forty thousand exhibits, thousands of photos, dozens of testimonies. He published some of them, notably the order to kill Trotsky, dated September 1931 and signed by Stalin, Voroshilov, Molotov and Ordzhonikidze. It was renewed in 1934.

Volkogonov will finally reveal the name of the organizer of the assassination, who worked under the orders of Eitingon (the GPU general of whom Caridad Mercader was the mistress). This man is eighty-five years old and served fifteen years in prison at Khrushchev's initiative. Volkogonov managed to get him to talk. The first

decision to kill Trotsky was taken in September 1931, but it was of a general nature, whereas in 1934 a special group was created to hunt Trotsky. The special group dealt with the liquidation of political opponents abroad, and not only of Trotsky. The NKVD octopus had its tentacles all over the place. It was a secret service within the secret service, created to fight against exiles who, in turn, fought against Stalin's regime. These people were dangerous for Stalin, because they knew a lot.

"A tragicomedy"

Faithful to Gorbachevian thought, Volkogonov, who does not hide his admiration for several aspects of Trotsky's personality (and in

particular his anti-Stalinism from the 1920s), has an essential grievance against him. "He was trapped in a big misconception, the idea of world revolution. Even a week before his death, he wrote that he believed in the victory of the world revolution." Yes, comrade general, he had this culpable weakness which he shared with Lenin, the subject of your next book. On the other hand, as early as 1935, Stalin told Roy Howard that the idea that the USSR could encourage world socialist revolution was a "tragicomedy". Perhaps you will one day understand that, if you can now congratulate yourself on being able to write freely, if Stalin's followers have been swept away almost everywhere in Europe, it is because the tragicomic "big misconception" has not finished being talked about.

Mandel and Capitalist Breakdown

8 August 2020, by George Kerevan

For starters, Mandel, a Marxist, had a better track record of economic prediction than most economists - with insights still valid today, as we'll see below. He was also the antithesis of the rarefied, bourgeois academic. A Jewish resistance fighter against the Nazis in his Belgian homeland, Ernest was arrested and escaped three times. In the 50s, he was an important influence in the Belgian trades union movement. In the early 60s, Mandel was in Cuba working with Che Guevara on economic planning. He happily donated his own upturned car as a street barricade to fend off CRS stormtroopers, during the May '68 uprising in Paris. Yet Ernest was also a charming, non-dogmatic personality - as I found in the 1970s, when showing him around Edinburgh.

Above all, Mandel was an Enlightenment intellectual polymath. He lectured and wrote about political economy in a bewildering (sometimes intermingled) host of languages yet was always effortlessly intelligible and fascinating. In an absurdly crowded

life, he published 30 books and some 2,000 often technical articles - in German, Dutch, French, and English. One of these books was actually a political history of the crime novel, a genre to which he was addicted. Po-faced colleagues on the British New Left Review journal were aghast at this "lapse", but Ernest just smiled his perpetual, mischievous smile.

Ernest Mandel was no closet academic but a committed anti-capitalist. In fact, his path into academia proper was delayed by the small matter of his being banned - at one time or another - from entering a variety of Western democracies, including France, the United States, Australia, and Switzerland. The refusal of the Nixon administration to let Mandel into the US to lecture at Stanford University (and debate Kennedy's pet economist, John Kenneth Galbraith) was appealed all the way to the Supreme Court.

Late Capitalism

Mandel had committed the cardinal sin of being not only a Marxist but one who could wield his Marxism intellectually (and to great effect) against existing economic orthodoxy. Famously, he predicted the collapse of the post-war economic boom at a time when conventional bourgeois economists were fantasising that growth and full employment would last forever, thanks to state intervention. Mandel's magnum opus, entitled *Late Capitalism*, was written just before the 1974-75 global slump, the first synchronised recession since the 30s and bellwether of the arrival of the age of neoliberalism.

Late Capitalism is a 600-page, forensic analysis of the mechanics of the Keynesian era of 1940-1975, artfully predicting that government deficit spending and the permanent arms economy were not enough to delay a generalised global crisis. Mandel was one of the few theorists to grasp that

Keynesian deficit spending and high welfare expenditures meant high taxes, and that this would eventually squeeze profits to the point where capitalists revolted. He foresaw this would mean an assault on the welfare state compact that existed in most Western democracies, an assault eventually ushered in by Reagan and Thatcher.

Note here that Mandel was not predicting economic breakdown in some mechanistic fashion, similar to the vulgar propagandism of some on the socialist left (including the old Militant Tendency and its leader Ted Grant, who forecast the immediate collapse of capitalism on an annual basis). Rather, Mandel was trying to identify the play of contemporary economic and class forces in real time. For instance, in a prescient chapter of *The Second Slump* (1977), entitled 'Industrial Contraction, Financial Panic', Mandel identified a new seam of instability in global banking that would have fatal consequences decades later in the 2008 crash.

He notes that big corporations are increasingly able to borrow from the banking system while simultaneously obfuscating their accounts (think Enron, Carillion, and sub-prime mortgage lenders). Unfortunately, Mandel points out, "the competence of top bank officials...inevitably declines as recruitment speeds up" while "the atmosphere of sharpened competition prevailing among banks frequently impels them to take greater risks...". He also identified a shift towards central banks underwriting this reckless lending, opening up the prospect of a cycle of increasingly dangerous financial crises (sadly, this was a promising theme he failed to develop in later years - a fault shared by most Marxist economists around the end of the 20th century).

Mandel's Method

The crux of Mandel's method was to use Marxist economic categories to analyse current problems, illuminated with contemporary data rather than filial quotes from *Das Kapital*. The first example of this approach was Mandel's widely published Marxist Economic Theory, written in the 1950s

when he was editor of the Belgian Socialist Party newspaper *La Gauche*. In this work, he broke new ground by reconstructing Marxian economics through a critical engagement with post-war pro-capitalist economists and sociologists - a full-frontal ideological offensive against the academic citadel of bourgeois theory. As a result, Marxist Economic Theory had an impact well beyond Mandel's tiny Trotskyist circle, including radical movements in both North and South America. Significantly, bourgeois academics were forced to respond. Robert Heilbroner, a doyen of US mainstream economics, gave Mandel's book a critical yet highly complimentary examination in the *New York Review of Books*, calling the publication of the American edition "an event of great importance".

Mandel's restatement of Marxist economics broke with the mechanical determinism that had infected interpretations of *Das Kapital* among Stalinists, left social democrats and orthodox Trotskyists alike. He went back to Marx's original insight that the system is determined by an interplay of real forces. These interact dialectically, that is the various magnitudes and tendencies change each other when they interact. As a result, and like Marx, Mandel eschewed mono-causal explanations of capitalist instability and breakdown. Unlike some, he reaffirmed Marx's conclusion that the capitalist economic system is indeed entropic and subject to existential disruption because of the internal inconsistencies exhibited by the contending forces on which it is based.

To be critical, the method employed by Mandel can seem a trifle eclectic. Anglo-Saxon empiricism craves the simplicities of a mono-causal explanation of a crisis. Alas, the material world - especially the dense thicket of social relations that define a capitalist economy - is always multi-various, multi-faceted, multi-connected, and multi-directional. Making sense of the meta-phenomenon that is a mode of production requires concrete analysis in real time. What Marx provided (and Mandel revived and modernised) is a set of conceptual tools to describe the precise economic relationships and

forces at work in a specifically capitalist system. For Marx and Mandel, the interplay of these relationships and forces is never random. Rather it is governed by identifiable tendencies, aka "economic laws".

Long Waves

In particular, Mandel revived and embellished the idea of "long waves" of capitalist expansion and contraction, first identified by the Soviet statistician Nikolai Kondratiev (shot by the NKVD in 1938). Capitalist instability exhibits itself in periodic booms and slumps. But Kondratiev noticed a longer pulse of roughly 25-30 years expansion, in which investment in new technology triggered an increase in capital accumulation. This was followed by a similar downswing of 25-30 years, when profits slump and economic growth slows. Mandel went beyond Kondratiev's empirical studies to theorise the forces creating such generational economic pulses. At root, Mandel's fascination with the phenomenon of long waves represents an attempt to explain the prolonged existence of capitalism through the 20th century - a longevity persisting far beyond what the founding fathers or Lenin's generation could ever have imagined.

Mandel's chief concern was the totally unexpected (even by pro-capitalist economists) upswing during the period 1940-1965 - sometimes 1945-1970. Clearly there was a "long boom" in these decades, characterised by massive new investment in cars, consumer white goods, television, leisure and travel, automated machine tools and calculating devices, aircraft, atomic science, early computers, energy, and defence technology. On the class front, a massive expansion of the organised American and European industrial proletariat forced massive wage concessions, but these were affordable in the short term as a result of huge productivity and output gains. The detonation of this cycle Mandel located in the supercharged rise in the rate of exploitation (aka increasing relative surplus value) of the working class introduced by fascism allied to the wholesale physical destruction of

existing fixed capital during WW2. Mandel characterised this new period – somewhat inadequately – as “neo-capitalism” or “late capitalism”.

Within this framework, Mandel identified an important ancillary role played by competition between the triad of the US, the Common Market (later EU) and Japan. Europe formed the Common Market to shield itself from foreign competition while embarking on a massive capital investment programme exploiting the cheap labour of German, French and Italian peasant farmers driven from the land by the Common Agricultural Policy. Japan followed very much the same route. Result: by the start of the 60s, the US was under intense competition from Europe and Japan. The Kennedy administration responded by cutting taxes and promoting a massive wave of investment in new technology, in a bid to counter this reborn Franco-German and Japanese capitalism. Mandel was a long-time opponent of the Common Market and EU, seeing it for what it was – and still is – a front for the interests of European big business and finance capital.

What causes Economic Crises?

It's important to note that Mandel never relies on the intense competition between the post-war imperialisms as being the primary or exogenous explanation for the global over-investment and declining profit rates that broke the post-war boom – it is merely one factor to take into account. Instead, he sees crisis already built structurally into the system, as the very act of excessive global capital accumulation reduces the average rate of profit, till the extra productivity (relative surplus value) squeezed out of the global proletariat from new technical investments proves insufficient to pay their cost, and the system goes into stasis despite the cornucopia of extra goods being pumped out. The precise trigger for the moment of over-accumulation varies historically, but regardless, it is more the straw breaking the camel's back than the prime mover. In this, Mandel remains a classical Marxist.

In opposition to Mandel, the noted American Marxist historian Robert Brenner explicitly abandoned Marx's theory of the falling rate of profit, falling back on a geopolitical model that prioritises inter-imperialist economic competition as a motor force to explain long waves. This is interesting because Brenner has replaced Mandel as the leading economist writing for *New Left Review*, the British leftist theoretical journal. Brenner accepted the falling rate of profit as an empirical reality but argues it is an effect rather than a cause (see *New Left Review* I/229). But this led him into dangerous waters. Specifically, that capitalism has no internal tendency towards entropy, as Marx and Mandel claimed. Instead, Brenner pointed to “the inherent dynamism of the capitalist economy over the long run”. So what caused the down wave after the 70s? The answer had to be accident and conjuncture. Brenner suggested two factors. First, that excessive wage suppression had reduced effective demand too far – but surely a thinking capitalist class can remedy that? Second, that global market over-supply was blocking new investment. But surely this was just another way of saying that profitability had stalled – and stalled because there was already too much investment to earn a necessary return? Which was Marx and Mandel's point, to start with.

This is not an arcane debating point. We are once more in a period of intensifying global inter-imperialist competition, now with capitalist China added. How will this impact on future capital accumulation? After the post-war “long boom” ended in the 70s, Mandel predicted the next downswing – one we now associate with neoliberalism and globalisation. Unfortunately, he did not live long enough to focus his undoubted capacities on understanding the mechanics of this downswing – one that has produced an outpouring of academic Marxist tomes but little agreement. This intellectual lacuna suggests one weakness in Mandel's long-wave conceptual apparatus: explaining how these roller-coaster waves relate to Marx's theory of the ultimate breakdown of capitalism.

At the heart of Marx's original

theoretical framework lies the notion of “zusammenbruch” – the ultimate breakdown of capitalist reproduction through accumulation (though it must be stressed Marx never completed his detailed analysis of these tendencies). Breakdown not in the sense of a single cataclysmic day but rather the cumulative decay and ultimate non-functioning of the system caused by its internal contradictions. Certainly, *zusammenbruch* has taken its time in arriving, leading some to reject Marx's economic logic (beginning with his close disciple Eduard Bernstein). The problem with the long-wave theory is that it can be interpreted as justifying the absence of any inherent entropy in the system, despite Mandel's best intentions. In other words, capitalism trundles on regardless through a series of Houdini-like escapes (think 2009). Who knows but a resilient capitalism may survive well into the 21st century on a tide of green investments (the next investment upswing?) aided by a workforce newly disciplined through the precarious gig economy and internet surveillance? In which event – short of a *deus ex machina* from outwith the system – the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism seems a dim prospect.

But this is not the case. Without for one moment rejecting the conjunctural importance of renewed imperialist competition (which brings the threat of war) or of climate change, it is important to state that global capitalism has entered a terminal phase of its existence, as a result of its own internal economic contradictions. This is just as Mandel predicted (following Marx). The last half century has seen the emergence of a global glut of manufacturing capacity, a subsequent contraction in capital investment rates, followed by a collapse in productivity growth. If anything, the Kondratiev cycle seems to have turned into a permanent downcycle. Both Marx and Mandel predicted such a tendency was inherent in capitalism as a mode of production. They link this entropy to an inherent dynamic in capitalism towards a falling rate of profit which acts as a disincentive to invest.

This is not the place for a detailed technical discussion of how this process works. Suffice to say that in

capitalism value is created by exploiting labour power - both in the form of living labour in the office or factory, and in embodied labour in machinery and computers. The available amount of living labour therefore sets a limit to production and capital accumulation. Capitalists constantly try to squeeze extra output from existing labour supplies by investing in technology. Given the biological limit to the working day, it takes an increasing volume of investment in machines to create each increment in value from the living workforce. Hence the downward pressure on the average rate of profit.

This downward pressure on the average profit rate operates at a global, systems level with a resulting negative impact on investment decisions. Individual firms or even individual national economies can continue to expand for a time (e.g. the US hi-tech monopolies). But Mandel warns: "a fraction of newly accumulated capital can no longer be invested at the 'normally anticipated' conditions of profitability. This capital is then increasingly directed into speculation..." (The Second Slump, pp 173-175). Hence the financial and bank instability of the past two decades, and the present insane rise in stock exchange prices. Or the uninvested capital is simply consumed by the capitalist class in luxury consumption. There are still absolute monetary profits, of course, but ultimately expected marginal returns become insufficient to fund the historic level of investment in plant and machinery. Increasingly the capitalist class refuses to invest in new technology or spread its use through the entire spectrum of human needs, as opposed to mad speculative schemes such as the present one of building rockets for space tourism. It is like a human body whose organs are shutting down one by one. Thus the

only historic mission of capitalism - to boost human productivity - comes to a shuddering halt. In the real world, productivity growth has flat-lined over the past few decades despite the advent of the internet. This is the ultimate proof that capitalism has become a decadent mode of production.

Of course, different industrial sectors develop at different rates across the world. It is obvious in the past three decades that US hi-tech firms have created new markets and reaped monopoly (above average) profits, while other sectors (like cars) have seen profit rates tumble. Overall, the capitalist system has entered its geriatric stage and if we miss this we will be unprepared for the events of the next few decades. Trump's naked attempt to protect US monopoly profits in hi-tech from Chinese encroachment offers little respite. Companies such as Apple and Microsoft are sitting on cash mountains or buying back shares rather than investing. The global system of capital accumulation for accumulation's sake is turning itself off for lack of investment opportunities that satisfy its profitability criteria. This is an historic insanity given the threat to humanity from climate change (itself a by-product of capitalist growth). As a result, we are entering a new era of resistance and social revolution that will dominate the rest of the 21st century.

Why Remember Ernest Mandel?

Why remember Ernest Mandel so long after his death? Above all because he presents a massive and sustained intellectual argument against the irrationality of free-market capitalism.

But more, he presents the case for an alternative reality. Neoliberalism has tried to corner the market in ideas, essentially claiming no other world order is possible except liberal democracy, private ownership of production, absolute free trade in goods and services, and free movement of capital and labour. The result is actually zero gains in productivity despite new technology; the creation of bogus consumer demand while the southern hemisphere starves and the northern hemisphere dies of obesity; everywhere the lengthening of the working week despite the invention of robots and artificial intelligence that could free human beings from toil; and the rise of authoritarian populism and surveillance capitalism.

How would Ernest Mandel have reacted to this very real dystopia we are all living in? Mandel was often criticised for being "too optimistic" regarding the prospects of overthrowing the capitalist system. Indeed, he was one of the few Marxist thinkers of the contemporary era who allowed himself to sketch out what the post-capitalist future might look like. In particular, he argued incessantly that with the abolition of capitalism it would be possible to introduce a radical reduction in the working week very quickly. For here lies the ultimate absurdity of capitalism: it invents and builds machines to free humans from work, then forces people to work even longer producing commodities solely for the purpose of generating more profit, rather than satisfying needs. Mandel held the conviction that human beings would eventually revolt against such an irrational system. That's a vision to be optimistic about - even in the darkness of the present crisis.

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Source [Conter blog](#).

The work of Ernest Mandel, a significant legacy for revolutionary combat in the 21st

century

20 July 2020, by Manuel Kellner

The red thread of Ernest Mandel's thought, the axis around which both his writings and his life as a revolutionary militant turned, was the united self-activity and democratic self-organisation of the working class: the keystone for a universal human emancipation. The central idea of his contributions concerning the strategy of combat for a classless society, and at the same time the quintessence of his vision of the socialist democracy to come at the world level, stemmed from his critiques of capitalism and other coercive contemporary systems. The internationalism of Ernest Mandel was organic, linked to the centre of his preoccupations and inseparable from his commitment to the interests of the employees, the oppressed, the dispossessed and all those left behind.

That also explains why Ernest Mandel wrote on so many subjects. His remarkable biography by Jan Willem Stutje shows us the man and his devotion to the revolutionary cause as well as to the construction of our Fourth International. [24] The collection of talks given at the 1999 seminar in Amsterdam on his contribution to Marxist theory, edited by Gilbert Achcar, is rich in lessons. [25] My book on his theoretical work, based essentially but not solely on the appraisal of his writings, gives an overall view of his theoretical contribution while discussing its strengths and weaknesses. [26]

Critique of political economy

Mandel's *Marxist Economic Theory*, published in 1962 (completed in May 1960) sought to demonstrate "that it is possible, on the basis of the scientific data of contemporary science, to reconstitute the whole economic system of Karl Marx". [27] The wealth of references to a great number of

publications from various areas of the social and human sciences supported his line of argument on what remains relevant in Karl Marx's critique of the capitalist mode of production - in spite of the long term economic expansion of the post-war period.

In this work, as in others dealing with the same subject and in his numerous "Introductions" to the works of Marx and his successors, Mandel distanced himself from the scholastic pseudo-Marxist approach of "proving" Marx had been right with waves of quotations. Also, Mandel was in no way tempted to treat the categories of Marx's critique of political economy as data which flow logically and in a dogmatic manner from one to the other. His ambition was to synthesise economic history and economic theory; to show that it was there that we should see the strength of Marx's approach. For example, he developed the labour theory of value on the basis of pre-capitalist examples of the appropriation of surplus product by a dominant class.

The great advantage of this method is didactic. I know a certain number of contemporaries who, like myself, have had access to Marx's *Capital* through the reading of Mandel's writings. Mandel's style was the illustration of his arguments by a great number of concrete examples. That is why he was very easy to understand and convincing in his writings as in the presentations he made in educational courses, seminars or political meetings. In the preface to his *Late Capitalism*, he details and defends his "genetic-historic" method, while relativizing it a little, because he accepted the critique of having been too "descriptive" in *Marxist Economic Theory*. [28]

Mandel was not the partisan of a determinist conception of historical-dialectical materialism. He spoke of "partially autonomous variables"

determining the evolution of the capitalist mode of production. He explained why this mode of production appeared first in the countries of Western Europe, not because of general "laws" of historic development, but because certain specificities, certain preconditions, were met there at a moment in history. For example, the gold looted in Latin America strengthened the possibilities of accumulation of money capital and the total separation of a significant part of the population from its means of production, allowing massive investment in the exploitation of the labour force. In China, these preconditions were not met and thus - even if certain technologies were more developed than in Europe - the capitalist mode of production was not able to develop.

Written in German and published in 1972, *Late Capitalism* (*Spätkapitalismus*) is considered as Mandel's magnum opus. To situate this work it is necessary to remember that at that time we were still far from neoliberal hegemony. The dominant ideology presented apologetics for the capitalist system by suggesting that the obvious contradictions of this mode of production were things of the past: state intervention had proved able to control crises, the standard of living of many employees had visibly improved, the countries of the "third world" had the chance to catch up with the level of the rich countries, the progress of social security systems had overcome the tendencies to pauperisation of the broad masses.

In this context, Mandel explained that the contradictions of capitalist class society had not been overcome but would explode still more powerfully in the near future. He analysed the concrete changes of the functioning of this post-war capitalism which was, for him, a new period in the context of the monopolistic or imperialist capitalism analysed by Lenin.

Mandel also contributed to the explanation of the destructive crises of capitalist overproduction which appear regularly – proof of the failure of the capitalist system and a good example of the strength of Marx’s critique of the capitalist mode of production. His original contribution was the rejection of mono-causal explanations – such as the theory of under-consumption or that of the disproportion between the great departments of production, or again the overaccumulation of capital. In his synthesis, the fluctuations of the rate of profit play an important role. Mandel did not just study the explanatory force of the different approaches, but also their role in the struggle between the working class and capital. For example, the theorisation of underconsumption served the reformist leadership to limit themselves to increasing the purchasing power of the masses, supposedly sufficient to combat the crisis. But if wages rose, profits fell... which would hardly encourage capitalist investment. The theories of the disproportion between the different sectors of production for their part stemmed from the “anarchy” of capitalist production. Here again, this was used as an argument for a “super-holding” so as to overcome the effects of competition on investment decisions. Finally, over-accumulation was used as an argument by capital to increase the production of surplus-value. A “Marxist version” of this kind of theory presupposes an unemployment rate of virtually zero over a very long period, which is utopian in the capitalist mode of production.

The other side of the coin is the function of cyclical crises. From the viewpoint of capital, these are crises of “cleaning”, in a convulsive way bringing prices back to real values in a manner in which only the strongest enterprises and capitals remain in place, to the detriment of the weakest, who disappear. The tendency to the concentration and centralisation of capital is thus realised, in a catastrophic manner, through its crises.

Ernest Mandel was on the rare Marxist theorists to have theorised the “long waves” of capitalism: these

periods of general expansionary or depressive tendencies, which each contain several cycles of shorter length. But whereas the conjunctural crises of industrial cycles contain in themselves the germ of economic revival, Mandel argued that the long periods of depressive tendency did not contain the elements necessary to the return to a period of an expansionary character. For that, exogenous factors are needed, extra-economic and generally of a political character. Thus, for example, the secular defeat of the working class leading to the Second World War as well as the catastrophic destruction caused by the latter allowed a spectacular rise of surplus-value, to the detriment of employees, thus providing the bases for the post-war expansionary period.

In a certain sense, following Marx, Ernest Mandel also spoke of the coming “collapse” (*Zusammenbruch*) of the capitalist mode of production, when the latter seemed to be at the height of its success. But he did not believe in an economic mechanism leading by itself to such a collapse. Indeed he stressed that if the employees and oppressed were defeated and were unable to oppose the inhuman treatment that capitalism would impose on them, then the latter could pull through – theoretically – but at the price of falling into global barbarism. Instead of a purely economic collapse, Mandel defended the idea of a global multiform crisis, which included the crisis of the system of political and ideological domination of the capitalist class. A structural crisis whose result is either socialism or the end of human civilisation.

Socialism

Basing himself in this respect on the writings of Marx and on the terms of the debates of the Russian Bolsheviks and the young Communist International during the revolution, Ernest Mandel considered that socialism was a society without classes and thus without a state – without this coercive armed apparatus raised above of society. In such a society, conceived as the first phase of communism, the domination of human over human would give way to the common management of things, of the

material goods of society, by the freely associated producers. Commodities and money would no longer be a quasi-natural force subjecting humans, the market economy would be in the process of disappearing to increasingly give way to a common management aimed at satisfying needs. As for communism, it would be – as Marx had sketched it – a society in which the freedom of each would be the condition for the freedom of all: not an “end of history” but on the contrary the real beginning of the history of humanity liberated from all the atrocities of a past characterised by exploitation, oppression and violence.

According to Mandel, to arrive at socialism it was necessary that the working class, by mobilising all the oppressed layers, take power into its hands and appropriate the productive forces developed by capitalism at the world level to manage them and transform them in its own interest. The political system appropriate for this would be a socialist democracy, the sole form of domination of the working class (Marx and Engels identified the “dictatorship of the proletariat” with the Paris Commune of 1871 – an outline if such existed of the most flourishing democracy) capable at the same time of effectively combatting the resistance of the possessing classes to their expropriation and of installing a democratic planning. It would still be a state, but a state which carried within itself from the beginning the germ of its own withering away, thus preparing the development of a society without classes, “socialist” in the full sense of the word.

Of course, what revolutionaries call the “transitional society” (to socialism) – which begins to exist directly after the seizure of power by the working class – is of more interest to ordinary people than the utopia of the hoped for situation which will emerge from it after some decades. And on that point, Mandel was very explicit: from the beginning, this society of transition to socialism should visibly improve the lot of employees and the broad masses. Not only guaranteeing broader democratic liberties than any possible bourgeois parliamentary democratic republic, but also

providing a solid material base allowing the masses to truly exercise their democratic rights, participating in bodies of self-management and in the political decision making processes. For Mandel, this involved a general radical reduction of working time, along with an appreciable standard of living for all. In such a transitional society, a plurality of parties and thus political options would be needed as well as independent mass organisations and associations, starting with trade unions.

Searching for a weak point in Mandel's argument, we quickly come across the problem of these "material bases" necessary to realise this emancipatory progress. In reading the chapter dealing with this problem in *Marxist Economic Theory* - written, let us recall, at the very beginning of the 1960s - what catches the eye is that Mandel was then far from being as conscious of ecological problems as he was to become during the 1980s (not to mention the positions of the Fourth International today). In the sources of a socialist accumulation mentioned by Mandel in the early 1960s, nuclear power and the extensive development of agriculture with the aid of chemical fertiliser are cited, something he would not have written later on.

It should certainly be kept in mind that Mandel's concept of liberation is strongly linked to a relative abundance of resources of consumption, without which a distribution of consumption goods in non-commodity form is conceivable only with a system of rationing. For it amounts not only to the satisfaction of elementary needs, but at the same time a radical reduction of working time. If many forms of productions are to be eliminated to save the climate and the earth, if energy production should be significantly reduced, if agrarian production must function without monocultures, labour productivity will not be spectacularly increased. But without a radical reduction of working time and material wellbeing for everyone, socialist democracy will not function. All this should then be rethought.

Strategy

Inside the capitalist system, the democratic self-organisation of employees develops through collective struggle against capital and its state. Mandel invites us to conceive a struggle which extends and generalises, as in Wallonia in 1960-1961. It is in fact the idea of an insurrectionary general strike. The very necessities of the struggle, if it is led in a consistent manner, lead to the extension of the movement and the multiplication of the tasks that it sets itself, including those linked to public safety. The democratically elected organs of the strikers begin to contest rights of sovereignty and legitimate representation with the organs of the bourgeois state. In this way simple strike committees can develop to become councils, "soviets", that is the organs of an alternative state emerging from below. There thus appears first a situation of dual power, which after a certain period of time must be resolved, either in the sense of the re-establishment of the full authority of the bourgeois state, or that of the conquest of power by the democratically centralised councils.

Politically, the working class is not homogeneous. In normal times, revolutionaries only represent a minority within it. In the context of a broad united self-activity developed in the class struggle, times are not normal. The working class masses do not learn very much in passivity and atomisation but learn a great deal quickly from when they create spaces of self-determined collective activity. The revolutionary current must seek, in the context of such a broad movement, to win increasing support for its general ideas and its practical proposals so that they can win majority support in the councils.

To achieve this, revolutionaries must seek to apply a whole arsenal of strategic concepts elaborated by the Communist movement in the early 1920s, lost under the reign of Stalinism, but preserved and updated constantly by the Fourth International:

- The policy of the united front: common action with the reformist parties and organisations for concrete

goals and demands.

- Transitional demands: they start from the consciousness and problems experienced by the mass of workers to propose solidarity-based solutions (like the reduction of working time without loss of wages, with proportional hiring and workers' control over working conditions, a ban on lay-offs and so on) which are, in their dynamic, incompatible with the capitalist system.

- The construction of a revolutionary party: this latter would bring together the broad social and working class vanguard, all those who lead the struggle constantly, and not only at times of uprisings of the broad masses.

- The organisation of memory and reflection at the national and international levels, so that the experiences lived through in a period of a rise of the movement are not lost in a period of reflux and can then inform the orientation of new surges in the mass movement.

Ernest Mandel's socialist strategy was organically internationalist. He argued for the appraisal of the political and social situation starting from the world level, its markets, its coercive resources, the crying inequalities that capitalism deepens, but also the potentialities of resistance, the various movements of an emancipatory character at the international level. For poor and dependent countries, he defended the strategy of permanent revolution, for which the tasks of the democratic revolution and the assertion of national sovereignty as well as a radical agrarian reform could not be led to the end by bourgeois forces and hence necessitated the seizure of power by the working class allied to the mass of oppressed and dispossessed layers, thus inserting itself in the process of world socialist revolution.

Analysis of the bureaucracy

The workers' mass organisations (associations, trade unions, parties) created inside of capitalism cannot do without full timers. Organisers, journalists, professional politicians and so on are needed so that such

organisations as well as their parliamentary representation can function. Ernest Mandel was very much conscious of this. But he stressed the price to be paid for it: the ascent of a privileged bureaucratic layer inside the workers' organisations which developed specific interests and became increasingly conservative. It links up with the more affluent layers of the salariat, hates the revolution "like fire" (Friedrich Ebert), and channels and sabotages the movement which could challenge the "routinist" rhythms of the capitalist domination of society.

Against these bureaucracies, Mandel proposed the construction of left, class struggle currents, especially inside the trade unions, which offered alternative strategic choices and personnel to the conservative-reformist orientations of the bureaucratic leaderships. It was clear for him that the left alternatives could only succeed in the context of broad and combative mass movements. The first task of revolutionaries is then to do all they can to promote, encourage and support any momentum of collective self-activity of the employees and the oppressed. The mass workers' organisations, inside capitalism, were for Mandel double-edged instruments: unavoidable to confront the power of the employers, their associations and their parties, and at the same time seeking to limit the struggles solely to demands for real wages, better working conditions, better social protection in the context of capitalism. Thus self-limited, these organisations often renounce going beyond solely symbolic success. To make them into effective instruments in the sense of the immediate interests of the employees, it is necessary to organise to break them from their policy of class collaboration and social peace.

The bureaucracies of the trade unions and workers' parties, more or less adapted to the bourgeois parliamentary democratic states, maintain a mode of organisation which is more or less authoritarian and undemocratic, smothering rank and file initiatives, fiercely combating left opponents. The bureaucratic regimes of the party-states merged in power, in the countries of so-called "actually existing socialism", were outright

oppressors. The bureaucratisation of the USSR had brought to power Stalin's faction which was the appropriate representative of this bureaucratic privileged layer. To defend its material interests, this bureaucracy sought above all to break with the revolutionary past of Bolshevism and with the very idea of world revolution. That is why the concept of "socialism in one country" and a policy of state power replaced the strategy of permanent revolution and consistent internationalism of the young Communist International.

The revolutionary Marxist critique of these regimes is not the same as the critique made by the bourgeois ideologues. Certainly, the terrible crimes of Stalin and his clique should be denounced, but at the same time the clearly conservative character of the "official Communism" established under the reign of Stalin should be understood.

To characterise these states, Mandel rested above all on the analyses of Trotsky, while enriching them by recognising new tendencies. The term "bureaucratically degenerated workers' state" irritates. Already Trotsky did not greatly like it and used it in the absence of anything better. Indeed, what is the meaning of a workers' state (even strongly bureaucratised), where the working class does not exercise power and is also deprived of elementary democratic rights?

Mandel's main argument, following Trotsky, was the fact that certain conquests of the October 1917 revolution remained in place: neither the means of production nor labour power were commodities; the law of value and the market did not dominate the economy, which was planned; the state still held the monopoly of foreign trade. These were non-capitalist societies of transition to socialism, although bureaucratically petrified. It was necessary then, at the level of tasks, to combine the defence of the non-capitalist elements against any attempt at the restoration of capitalism from inside or outside with the revolutionary overthrow of the political power of the bureaucracy to return to a socialist democracy of the councils.

The process of the rupture of Stalinist monolithism and the crisis of Stalinism, then of post-Stalinism was encouraging for Mandel and for the Fourth International, but also full of theoretical and programmatic challenges. After the collapse of the USSR and allied or similar regimes in Europe, Mandel strongly welcomed the fall of the Stalinist "dead weight", and he saw already opened a revolutionary process in the sense of the hoped-for political revolution and a return of the aspiration to an authentic socialist democracy at the level of the masses. There were signs going in this sense, Mandel's hopes were broken on the reality of the process of capitalist restoration and the triumphant victory of the capitalist "West" in the "Cold War", which was obviously a sizeable defeat for the working class at the planetary level.

In his great book on bureaucracy, *Power and Money* Mandel wrote, in a self-critical manner, that "revolutionary Marxism" (and hence himself) had underestimated the devastating effects of decades of Stalinist and post-Stalinist reign on workers' consciousness. It had also overestimated the potential of resistance to the restoration of capitalism inside the dominant bureaucracy itself. [29] These are significant elements, but they do not suffice to put an end to this debate.

The truly original chapter of this book concerns "substitutionism" and it is of a very special interest for revolutionaries. For if the substitutionist ideology is characteristic of the leaderships of the big bureaucratic apparatuses - who seek to justify their constant tendency to act in the name of and in place of the employees - revolutionary leaders, in certain circumstances, are also tempted by substitutionism. Mandel gives some convincing examples of this not only for Lenin and Trotsky, but also for Luxemburg and Gramsci! And he shows that it is the degree of autonomous activity of the working class and the oppressed which is the determinant factor. If this degree is very low, substitutionism of every kind (parliamentary, caudillist, terrorist, propagandist and so on) often takes place. And Mandel concludes from this once again that the main task of

revolutionaries is to do all they can to promote, encourage and promote the self-activity of the working class and the oppressed masses in general.

To debate

The theoretical contribution of Ernest Mandel is too rich to be subjected to a critical examination in a few lines. I will have to limit myself to raising three questions and invite the reading of my book. A question which goes to the heart of revolutionary Marxism is whether the actuality of the world socialist revolution remains in the 21st century, and whether the working class has lost its potential to lead such a revolutionary process. Already Trotsky had expressed some doubts here in arguing that if the Soviet working class proved incapable of overthrowing the regime of the bureaucracy to re-establish its own class power, the transitional programme would lose its meaning and should be replaced by a new minimum programme for the defence of the elementary interests of the masses reduced to slavery. And today? The proof has not been made that the

reconstruction of a revolutionary and emancipatory workers' movement remains possible. New breakthroughs, starting with the rise of the PT in Brazil in the early 1980s have regularly foundered, until now.

The Marxism of Ernest Mandel merits discussion. What was his dialectic between an "open" Marxism which at the same time leaned towards certain orthodoxies ("Marxist", "Leninist", "Trotskyist")? Was his search for an overall doctrinal coherence linked to the need to safeguard and strengthen his own relatively small organisation? It should be said in passing that his Marxism - in philosophical terms his worldview (*Weltanschauung*) - borrowed much from the writings of popularisation of Engels and of Plekhanov, who had more or less invented the "Marxist doctrine". It was also a Promethean Marxism of the classic workers' movement linked to a strong belief in social, technological and scientific progress and in the creative potentiality of the working class, capable of resolving the most difficult problems.

Ernest Mandel didn't like the fact that it was often said of him that he was too "optimistic". He had acquired a

strong confidence in himself in predicting the developments of the 1960s and 1970s which actually happened - not all of them, but nonetheless - in a fairly convincing manner. He was always on the lookout for the development of movements with emancipatory potential anywhere in the world. Sometimes he overestimated the revolutionary potentials, or underestimated the difficulties.

Already, at the age of 23, he saw Abraham Léon as a model when he encouraged his comrades to "see behind each reason for despair a reason for hope". How was it possible to lead the revolutionary combat against Nazism and war at the height of midnight in the 20th century and at the same time keep one's humanist élan without such an admirable moral force? At his point it is customary to quote Antonio Gramsci. For a bit of a change, I will conclude by citing Robert Merle who said of his male hero, the delphinologist Sevilla: "He was not naive enough to think that a cause triumphs because it is right, but he could not afford the luxury of being pessimistic". [30]

The economics of Ernest Mandel, yesterday and today

20 July 2020, by **Michel Husson**

The diffusion of Marxism

Mandel played a key role in the dissemination of a Marxism freed of its Stalinist garb, always taking care to establish a link between economic analyses and militant action. His first important contribution is *Marxist Economic Theory* published in 1962. This synthesis benefited from wide international circulation and contributed to the revival of a living Marxism, free from dogmatism and

seeking to integrate recent developments. Chapter XI, devoted to periodic crises, gives a good example: Mandel already outlines a synthesis between theories based on underconsumption and on disproportionality, referring to the contributions of economists such as Harrod, Kuznets, Samuelson, Goodwin, Kalecki and Joan Robinson. He finds that they are "excessively simplified" but that they "nevertheless contribute important material".

In 1963, Mandel gave a series of lectures during a weekend educational

school organized by the Paris Federation of the Unified Socialist Party (PSU). These lectures gave rise to a short (80-pages) book, *Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory* which was reprinted several times. [31] Even though it obviously deserves to be updated, it is a remarkable text, very educational, and very revealing of Mandel's constant concern to build bridges between the most demanding theory and the education of activists.

In 1967 Mandel published *The Formation of the Economic Thought of*

Karl Marx. [32] This book was particularly interesting because it made known a fundamental work by Marx - the *Grundrisse* - even before the first French translation by Roger Dangeville was available. We should read in particular the chapter devoted to "the dialectic of working time and free time", which is a perfect introduction to the theme of the reduction of working time.

We can see that Mandel set out to disseminate Marx's economic thought, always with the concern of offering a non-dogmatic version. It is therefore no coincidence that he was asked to preface the English edition of *Capital* (published by Penguin Books), which was, by the way, an indication of how well Mandel was known in the Anglo-Saxon world. Unfortunately, these introductions to the three books of *Capital* are not available in French, although they have been translated into Spanish and put together in a book called *El Capital. Cien Años de Controversias En Torno a la Obra de Karl Marx*. They constitute a remarkable introduction to the major work of Marx.

The problem of "transformation"

We can extract from it a passage devoted to the problem known as the transformation of values into prices. This theoretical question is important because it has given rise to a critique of Marx's theory of value: there is supposedly an insurmountable contradiction between Book I of *Capital* (values are proportional to the labour expended) and Book III (prices are proportional to the capital advanced).

Mandel's answer consists in challenging the fundamental hypothesis of Marx's critics that the prices of the production of inputs (what goes into production) are identical to the prices of outputs (what is produced) : " the inputs of the current cycles of production are data , which are known at the start of the cycle, and have no retroactive effect on the equalization of profit rates between the different branches during this cycle. It suffices to consider that

they are also calculated in production prices and not in values, but that these production prices are the result of the equalization of profit rates during the previous cycle , and all inconsistency disappears (...) Production prices of raw materials, like those of all inputs used in production (...) are the result of the equalization of the rates of profit which took place during the previous period. In a few words, the solution was thus delivered. But, curiously, Mandel's position would remain without follow-up on his part : in the collective work entitled *Ricardo, Marx, Sraffa*, he only dealt with the problem of transformation from the angle of the role of gold and money. [33]

The trajectory of capitalism

The performances of post-war capitalism (low unemployment, growth in purchasing power) went against the theses on the inevitable collapse or on the pauperisation of the proletariat defended by the Stalinist economists. To analyse this new configuration, Mandel spoke of neo-capitalism (a term which he later abandoned) but began to mobilize the idea of long waves.

As early as 1963 - in his *Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory* which we have already mentioned -, Mandel refers to Kondratiev, then stresses that " the long-term wave which started with the Second World War and in which we are still - let us say the 1940-1965 or 1940-1970 wave - was, on the contrary, characterized by expansion ". This made possible " a tendency for the standard of living of workers to rise". There is therefore a farsighted anticipation of the coming reversal, which was specified in a remarkable article published in 1964 in the review *les Temps modernes*, where Mandel predicted the imminent end of the post-war expansion, which was not yet being called the " Thirty Glorious Years". [34]

With the theory of long waves, Mandel returns to the elaborations of the early twentieth century, including those of Parvus and Trotsky. We reproduce the original curve appearing in Trotsky's

article of 1923 and its French transcription. [35] It already outlines the key idea of long wave theory, namely that capitalism spans historical periods : " 20 years of very gradual capitalist development (AB) ; 40 years of energetic rise (BC) ; 30 years of protracted crisis and decline (CD) "and Trotsky points out that these are not cycles, as wrongly thought by Kondratiev, because " their character and their duration are determined not by the internal play of capitalist forces, but by the external conditions which create the conditions of their development ".



The rate of profit

Mandel always referred to the classic formulation of the law of the downward trend of the rate of profit. This is evidenced, for example, by the presentation he gives of it in his text "Partially independent variables and internal logic in classical Marxist analysis" : " the rise in the organic composition of capital leads to the tendency of the the average rate of profit to fall (...) In the long term, the rate of surplus-value cannot increase in proportion to the rate of increase in the organic composition of capital, and most of the counter-tendencies tend at least periodically (and also in the very long term) to be supplanted in their turn". [36]

This traditional formulation is, however, subject to debate, because the incontestable increase in the physical composition of capital (the number of "machines" per worker) does not necessarily entail that of the organic composition (in value) because between the two, there is labour productivity. The fact remains that the unfolding of long waves has something to do with the rate of profit. But that does not mean that the expansive phase is triggered automatically as soon as the profit rate crosses a certain threshold. This is a necessary but not sufficient condition. The way in which the rate of profit is restored must at the same time provide an adequate response to other questions, particularly

concerning the valorisation of the product by selling it on the market.

The rate of profit is however a good synthetic indicator of the double temporality of capitalism, as Mandel insisted. The establishment of a coherent productive order results in its maintenance at a high and more or less "guaranteed" level. After a certain time, the play of the fundamental contradictions of the system degrades this situation, and the crisis is always and everywhere marked by a significant fall in the rate of profit. This reflects a double inability of capitalism to reproduce the degree of exploitation of workers and to ensure the selling of goods, more than an upward trend in the organic composition of capital. It is in this way that we think it useful to reformulate the law of the downward trend of the rate of profit: the latter does not fall continuously, but the mechanisms which push it down always end up prevailing over what Marx called the counter-tendencies. The turnaround is endogenous, and the demand for a remodelling of the productive order therefore reappears periodically.

In any case, Mandel never made this law the alpha and omega of the explanation of crises. In the chapter of his book *The Second Slump: A Marxist Analysis of Recession in the Seventies* (NLB, London, 1978), devoted to this question, Mandel enumerates the causes invoked by various Marxist schools: "The over-accumulation of capital? Without a doubt (...) The under-consumption of the masses? Without a doubt (...) The anarchy of production and the disproportionality between the different branches? Without a doubt (...) The fall in the rate of profit? Without a doubt. Regarding this last approach, he specifies "but not in the mechanistic sense of the term either, which suggests a straight causal chain ". Mandel thus clearly rejects any monocausal explanation of the crisis and in particular the downward trend in the rate of profit, which is for some Marxists a pledge of orthodoxy.

In which wave?

Logically, the question that is posed is to know where we are. Our answer is

that we are still in the long recessive wave that started with the general recession of 1974-75 and continued through that of 1981-82. This requires several clarifications.

The first is that Mandel's theory never postulated that each long wave should last between 25 and 30 years. Admittedly, this was more or less the case in the past, but this observation does not mean that this should be the rule, simply because long waves are not cycles. It is absolutely necessary to reject this faulty assimilation, which we have found for example under the pen of Robert Boyer, one of the founders of the school known as that of regulation : " we cannot be satisfied with the rather mechanical interpretation proposed by N.D. Kondratiev, recently taken up by E. Mandel, who represents the history of capitalism as the succession of waves of strong then of weak accumulation, lasting approximately a quarter of a century (...) No teleological principle guarantees either the mechanical succession of ascending, then descending phases, or the automatic passage from a regime of mainly extensive accumulation to a predominantly intensive regime". [37]

This is a gross error of understanding Mandel's writings, to be compared with what Mandel explained in the first version in 1980 of his book on long waves : "The emergence of a new long expansive wave cannot therefore be considered as an endogenous product - more or less spontaneous, mechanical, autonomous - of the previous long depressive wave, whatever the duration and the severity of it. It is not the laws of development of capitalism, but the results of the class struggle during an entire historical period that determine this decisive turning point. In other words, our thesis is presented as follows: historical development goes through a dialectic of objective and subjective factors, within which subjective factors are characterized by relative autonomy. They are not directly and inevitably predetermined by what has happened in the past in terms of fundamental trends in capital accumulation, trends in technological change, or the impact of these trends on the process. of organisation of work itself". [38].

Or to sum it up: "Long waves are more than just movements of increase and decrease of the rate of growth of capitalist economies. They are, in the full sense of the term, specific historical periods. "

It is from this point of view that we must analyse the trajectory of capitalism since the turn of the 1980s. Admittedly, the rate of profit recovered, at least until the crisis of 2008, but that is not enough. Indeed, nothing is more foreign to the theory than to postulate that it is enough to reach a certain threshold to start a new expansive phase. What is new is that this recovery in the rate of profit (which some Marxist writers dispute) has not been accompanied by a recovery in accumulation, growth or productivity gains. In our view, this last point is primordial: the slowdown, or even the exhaustion, of productivity gains, is the most significant indicator of a loss of dynamism of capital.

Now, these productivity gains are made possible by the introduction of major technological innovations. In the theory of long waves, there is an organic link between the succession of long waves and that of scientific and technical revolutions. However, this connection cannot be reduced to a vision inspired by Schumpeter where innovation would be in itself the key to opening a new long wave. From this point of view, the mutations linked to new technologies undoubtedly constitute a new " techno-economic paradigm " but this is not enough to found a new expansive phase. This is the whole debate on secular stagnation, which starts from the observation that considerable innovations in all fields do not generate productivity gains.

Automation

Some people imagine that the new technologies carry the potential for productivity gains, which would also imply significant job cuts. Admitting that this prognosis holds true, one should question the social model associated with these transformations. On this point, it is useful to refer to an essential text by Mandel, which dates from 1986 : "Marx, the present crisis and the future of work" [39]. He

sketches a very pessimistic - but rather premonitory - picture of the effects of capitalist automation, evoking the prospect of a " dual society which would divide the current proletariat into two antagonistic groups : those who continue to participate in the process of production of surplus value, that is to say the capitalist production process (with a tendency to reduce wages) ; those who are excluded from this process, and who survive by all means other than the sale of their labour power to capitalists or the bourgeois state : social assistance, increase in "independent" activities, small peasants or artisans, return to domestic work, "playful" communities,

etc., and who buy capitalist goods without producing them. A transient form of marginalization from the "normal" production process is found in precarious work, part-time work and, moonlighting which particularly affect women, young workers, immigrants, etc. "

Mandel and the coronavirus

This anachronism is deliberate: its intention is to emphasize that the interest of Mandel's economic works does not only lie in the analyses they provide but also in the methodological

tools they offer us. That is why their reading, or re-reading, remains useful a quarter of a century after the disappearance of Mandel.

Long wave theory is largely based on the distinction between endogenous factors (which refer to the " normal " functioning of the system and its internal contradictions) and exogenous factors (which are in some way external to the system). Mandel devoted a large part of his reflections on this distinction, and we refer here to Francisco Louça's text , " Ernest Mandel and the pulsation of history". [134] Here again, it is a question of applying the dialectic of the general and the particular.

1993: The nature of social-democratic reformism

28 August 2005, by Ernest Mandel

This crisis has continued to worsen (as is shown by the splits that are now taking place in Germany and the divisions within the PS in France...), hand in hand with an ever-widening gap between the social-democratic party machines and the popular layers (witness the results of the referendums on the European Constitutional Treaty in France and the Netherlands).

The tendencies towards the social transformation of the social-democratic party apparatuses - prudently analysed by the author - have accentuated. Deeply attached to the analysis of reality and always on the lookout for the most up-to-date information that would enable him to confirm or invalidate his analyses, Ernest Mandel would certainly not have been satisfied with the publication of this article today, without being able to thoroughly update it.

Furthermore, for reasons of space and because some of the information included, especially in the final part of

the article, which was then immediately relevant, is now outdated, some cuts have been made, indicated by: (...). Finally, we have kept the author's notes and have completed them by some editorial notes, put in square brackets - []. The full text of this article will be made available on the [Ernest Mandel web site](#).

Since the October Revolution, the workers' movement has been confronted with the choice between two political practices. This is also a choice between two strategies.

This choice does not concern the "advisability" of the struggle for immediate objectives, both economic and political. It does not deal with an option for or against taking part in elections and participation in elected assemblies, not only for propaganda ends but to get laws adopted that

favour workers and other exploited and oppressed sections of society [135] .

Marx fought systematically for the legal reduction of the working day (week). He resolutely combated the super-exploitation of women workers and fought against child labour. Engels sought to extend to all countries the struggle for the 8-hour day and for universal suffrage, simple and equal for all citizens [136].

In the particular conditions of Tsarist Russia, Lenin followed a similar line, even more emphatically.



Santiago September 11 1973.
Right-wing coup fells Allende government

These combats were based on the conviction that a working class that was in a wretched state, incapable of fighting for its physical and moral integrity, would also be incapable of

fighting for a breakthrough towards a classless society. History has confirmed this diagnosis. Nowhere have bread riots led to a systematic anti-capitalist struggle, to a struggle for a better world. The path traced by Marx and the Marxists has on the other hand led to millions of the exploited becoming conscious of the necessity for such a struggle.

What however opposes revolutionary Marxism to social-democratic reformism is the attitude taken towards the economic and political class power of Capital. It is by the same token a fundamentally different attitude towards the bourgeois state.

Reformism is the illusion that a gradual dismantling of the power of Capital is possible. First of all you nationalise 20 per cent, then 30 per cent, then 50 per cent, then 60 per cent of capitalist property. In this way the economic power of Capital is dissolved little by little. You take from the bourgeoisie first of all a big city, then two municipalities, then the majority in Parliament, then the power to dictate teaching programmes, then the majority of the circulation of newspapers, then the control of the municipal police, then the power to choose the majority of top civil servants, magistrates and officers: the political power of Capital will just fade away.

Reformism is therefore essentially gradualist. Consequently, the real theoretician of reformism was Eduard Bernstein, with his celebrated formula: "the movement is everything, the end is nothing" [137]. Today German social democracy goes one better: drop by drop, we will dissolve the rock. We go from human history to the history of geological formations. How many thousand years does it take for a rock to dissolve?

Revolutionary Marxism is the rejection of gradualist illusions. Experience confirms that nowhere, in any country, has the bourgeoisie lost its economic and political power by the gradualist path. Reforms can weaken this power. They cannot abolish it. (...)

Society, like nature, has a horror of a vacuum. That corresponds to the strong centralising tendency that is

inherent in the degree of development of the forces of production. Every town, not to mention every factory, cannot have its own currency, its own Customs, its own pricing policy, its own telecommunications centre, or even its own hospital. There can be a period of dual power between the rule of Capital and the rule of the working class. But history confirms that this period can only last a short time.

If the working class does not succeed in building its own centralised power, the bourgeois state will maintain itself or be rebuilt. That is the principal lesson of all the revolutions of the 20th century. That is the positive balance sheet of the October Revolution. It is the negative balance sheet of the German Revolution and the Spanish Revolution, the two main defeats of the proletariat.

Strategy and violence

Social-democratic strategy does not differ from revolutionary Marxist strategy by a more radical rejection of violence. Revolutionaries can even send the ball back into the court of social democracy on this question. Inasmuch as the working class and the other exploited and oppressed social layers make up the majority, indeed the overwhelming majority of the adult population, the use of violence is for it marginal, indeed counter-productive for the creation of working-class power. What is essential, for the triumph of the proletarian revolution under these conditions, is the conquest of a new legitimacy. This model of the conquest of power is the October Revolution in Petrograd. It has been correctly pointed out that it cost fewer deaths than occur through traffic accidents in a weekend in any large country. (...)

We are convinced that with a bold, resolute and coherent orientation by the majority of the workers' movement at moments of impetuous, generalised mass action, the same process could have been repeated in May 1968 in France and during the hot autumn in 1969 in Italy. A big majority of soldiers would have refused to fire on their brothers, their sisters, their fathers,

their mothers, their workmates. De Gaulle, who was not lacking in tactical intelligence, shared this judgment. That is why he did not send troops to fire on strikers, he shut them up in their barracks, for fear that they would go over to the side of the people.

On the other hand, important sectors at least of the bourgeoisie cling desperately to power, even in the face of the immense majority of citizens. Like "Madam Veto" [nickname of Marie-Antoinette in 1791], they are ready to massacre all of Paris, all of Barcelona and Madrid, all of Berlin, all of Milan and Turin, all of Vienna, all of Shanghai, all of Djakarta, all of Santiago de Chile...in order to preserve their class power. If we leave them the means to do so, they will make rivers of blood flow [138].

The social democratic Right, which is opposed to the revolutionary seizure of power, does not in fact really reduce the incidence of violence. On the contrary, it encourages it, at least objectively, if not deliberately.

The gradual counter-revolution begun by Noske, Ebert and Scheideman in December 1918-January 1919, with the help of the Freikorps, ancestor of the future SA and SS, did not only pass over the bodies of Rosa Luxemburg, of Karl Liebknecht, of Leo Jogiches, of Hugo Haase. It passed over the bodies of the thousands of workers assassinated between 1919 and 1921, of the hundreds of workers killed between 1930 and 1933. It led to the hecatombs that the Nazi dictatorship caused. (...)

Furthermore, let us remember that the social-democratic Right fully accepted the violence of the First World War in the belligerent countries. This violence resulted in between 10 and 20 million dead, while to the bourgeoisie, the war appeared "normal", "natural", unavoidable. The violence of the struggle for power, on the other hand, is considered as "abnormal", "avoidable", indeed illegitimate.



Eduard Bernstein

In this sense, August 4th, 1914, the acceptance of the imperialist war by the social-democratic Right, also marks a turning point in the history of the 20th century. The inhuman and massive violence of the war was accepted without ongoing resistance or revolt. Only small minorities came out of it honourably. Passivity, resignation and cynicism spread in the face of massacres, and even of torture [139]. In this respect too, the historic responsibility of the social-democratic Right is overwhelming.

Social-democratic reformism and the future of capitalism

If it is necessary to act rapidly in order to carry through the revolutionary seizure of power, it is also necessary for a deeper reason. The power of Capital, including the repressive apparatuses that protect it, are characterised by a high degree of internal cohesion. Trotsky made in this respect a remarkable analysis of the particular nature of the officer corps, in conformity with its role, which reflects this cohesion [140].

It is practically impossible to shake this cohesion in normal times. It is only at exceptional moments that we see soldiers refusing to obey, or mass mutinies. That is one of the reasons why real revolutionary crises are relatively rare. In general they do not happen every year, or even every decade in each country. If we do not seize these relatively rare occasions, the bourgeoisie will remain in power for quite some time yet, with all that that implies.

These privileged moments for mass revolutionary action are in the last analysis the result of the exacerbation of the intense contradictions of bourgeois society. They lead to situations that Lenin summed up in a classical formula: Those on high can no longer govern as before, those below are no longer willing to be governed as before.

The debate between reformists and

revolutionary Marxists is therefore finally based on their different opinions concerning the future of capitalism. Bernstein claimed that the contradictions inherent in bourgeois society were steadily decreasing. There would be fewer and fewer wars, fewer and fewer repressive practices on the part of the state, fewer and fewer explosive social conflicts. Kautsky added, in his book *Terrorism and Communism*, that the bourgeoisie had become more and more benevolent, nice, peace-loving, taking as his model the US President Wilson.

Rosa Luxemburg counter-posed to Bernstein's diagnosis one that was diametrically opposed. There would be more and more wars, more and more social explosions, in comparison with the period 1871-1900.

The history of the 20th century has confirmed Rosa Luxemburg's diagnosis and not Bernstein's. Similarly, reformist politics, gradualist politics, have hardly been credible during the phases of acute crises that have marked our century, in particular between 1914 and 1923, during the 1930s and the 1940s and from before May 1968 until the Portuguese Revolution of 1974-75.

They have also been less credible since the beginning of the "long depressive wave" that we are in at present, and of the general offensive of Capital against Wage Labour and the peoples of the Third World that is accompanying it.

But the aggravation of the internal contradictions of capitalism is not linear and constant. It is interrupted by phases of temporary relative stabilisation: the main ones were 1924-1929 and 1949-1968. The period of prolonged economic recovery after the recession of 1980-82 produced some analogous symptoms.

During these phases, social-democratic reformism can regain a certain credibility in a series of countries, profiting moreover from particular situations, such as in the Scandinavian countries. This credibility is expressed by an easier acceptance by the broad masses of everyday reformist political practice.

Now, the alternation in time of revolutionary situations, of situations of relative stability, of counter-revolutionary dynamics, means that the victorious struggle for the seizure of power requires, over and above a vanguard party that is oriented towards that end, a working class that has been strengthened by sufficient experience of self-activity and self-organisation, within which this party can become hegemonic. This experience can only be acquired during non-revolutionary periods.

The practice of the workers' movement that is advocated by revolutionary Marxists does of course combine strikes for immediate gains, the strengthening to this end of trade unions and other mass organisations, participation in elections, the utilisation of elected assemblies, the fight for social legislation.

Priority to mass struggle

But the priority is accorded to mass extra-parliamentary action, to the mass strike, to the mass political strike, to the development of forms of self-organisation and direct rank-and-file democracy: elected strike committees; democratic mass meetings of strikers; neighbourhood and "housewives'" committees; initiatives of workers' and popular control, etc. It was Rosa Luxemburg who most systematically defended this strategy before 1914 [141].

The reformists radically refused these priorities. The leaders of the German trade unions before 1914 proclaimed: "Generalstreik ist Generalunsinn" - the general strike is generalised nonsense (stupidity). On this point too, historical experience has shown that Rosa Luxemburg was right and the reformists were wrong. There have been very many mass strikes, indeed general strikes, from 1905 onwards, in many countries.

But history has not shown that Rosa Luxemburg and the revolutionary Marxists were entirely right about the real practice of the broad working masses. There are a series of countries, and not the least important

ones, where mass strikes have never led to a general strike on a national scale. We only have to think of the United States and of Germany after 1923.

Countries that have experienced general strikes on a national scale have more often than not subsequently gone through long periods where extra-parliamentary mass actions were much more limited: for example in France since May 1968. There have only been a few countries where mass strikes, indeed general strikes, have taken place more systematically: above all in Argentina, Belgium, Australia, to some extent Italy and Spain, and more recently Brazil.

During more or less prolonged intervals, reformist practice has dominated the activity and determined the conscience of the masses, as it did in Britain during the 1950s and 1960s. During these periods, the revolutionary strategy and project undoubtedly lost their credibility.

We also have to recognize that even when the working class and the trade union movement systematically engage in a mass strike, or even a general strike, that does not automatically lead to a rise in the political consciousness of workers. The case of Australia is a good illustration of that. The case of Argentina confirms that this practice can even coincide with the total absence of elementary class political independence of the broad masses. (...)

The general conclusion that emerges from historical experience is that the development and the credibility of the social-democratic project are very closely linked to the relative stability of bourgeois society. This stability is in the long term unrealisable during our century of the historic decline of capitalism. It is utopian to base oneself on it. But that is not the case during specific periods of shorter duration.

A necessary, but not sufficient condition of these phases of relative stabilisation is economic growth that makes possible a parallel increase in real wages and in surplus value [142].

But even in periods of economic growth the working class can unleash impetuous mass actions that shake the stability of bourgeois society. That was especially the case of June 1936 in France, of the revolutionary explosion of July-August 1936 in Spain, of the Belgian general strike of December 1960-January 1961, of May 1968 in France, of the Portuguese Revolution, of the beginning of the rise of mass struggles in Brazil and in South Africa. The motives can be extremely varied: defence or conquest of democratic liberties; riposte to fascist threats; fear of future worsening of the situation as regards employment and wages; international class solidarity [143].

But the general formula remains: the credibility and the influence of the reformist social-democratic project are in direct proportion to the degree of relative stability of bourgeois society. The former cannot increase when the latter declines.

Social-democratic reformism and the bourgeois state

Social-democratic gradualism and the refusal to fight for the establishment of a workers' state in no way imply that the reformists do not really attach importance to the question of power. On the contrary, they are obsessed by it.

It is true that before 1914, there was only one country where social democracy had governed: Australia. But social democracy had begun to conquer the administration of municipalities. And from 1914 onwards governments in which social democracy strongly participated, and even entirely social-democratic governments, were seen in a series of countries.

Since the reformists rejected the taking of power by the working class, they had practically no choice: they were condemned to administer the bourgeois state. In this domain the rule that there is no third option in universally valid. No partly bourgeois and partly working-class state in

conceivable. [144] There never will be one.

This salto mortale was best illustrated by Emile Vandervelde, boss of Belgian social democracy and president of the Second International. Before 1914, he had written an interesting book entitled: *Socialism Against the State*. In 1914, he became a minister. He proclaimed that it was necessary to defend at all costs every scrap of power that was obtained. The majority of social-democratic parties followed the same reasoning.

Kautsky codified this in middle of the 1920s, commenting on the new social-democratic programme adopted after the reunification of the SPD and the USPD: "Between the government of the bourgeoisie and the government of the proletariat there stretches a period of transition, generally characterised by the coalition of the one with the other" [Karl Kautsky, *Die proletarische Revolution und ihr programme*, J.H.W. Dietz Nachfolger - Buchandlung Vorwärts, Stuttgart - Berlin 1922, p. 106].

The formula has to be interpreted from the point of view of its substance and not in a formal way. A government of coalition with the bourgeoisie is a government of institutionalised class collaboration. It is a government that accepts a permanent consensus with Capital: not to touch the essential structures of its power.

This class collaboration and this consensus are independent of the presence of bourgeois ministers in the government. As a matter of fact, the government which undoubtedly played the most nefarious role in the history of social democracy, the German Council of People's Commissars (*Rat der Volksbeauftragte*) of 1918-1919, after the departure of the USPD commissars, was an entirely social-democratic government without a single bourgeois minister. It suppressed the proletarian revolution, isolated Soviet Russia, concluded a pact with the Reichswehr, covered with its authority the murder of thousands of workers. It institutionalised long-term class collaboration between the employers and the trade union bureaucracy. All that in order to conquer and keep

"scraps of power" in the framework of the bourgeois state.

In a moment of lucidity, the leader of the British social-democratic Left, Aneurin Bevan, nevertheless stated: "The goal cannot be to exercise power (at any price, E.M.). The goal must be to exercise power in order to carry out our programme". Even more precisely, the American socialist leader Eugene V; Debs proclaimed: "It's better to vote for what you want, knowing that you have little chance of getting it (rapidly, E.M.) than to vote for what you don't want, knowing that you are sure to get it". Most social-democratic leaders have not exactly respected these wise pieces of advice.

Léon Blum had the undeniable gift of elegantly formulating half-truths, in other words sophisms. He invented the famous distinction between the exercise of power and the conquest of power (furthermore, he did not hesitate to identify the latter with the dictatorship of the proletariat). But he conjured away the fact that the exercise of power would necessarily take place in the framework of the bourgeois state. He did not at all point out that this same exercise of power would consequently imply a permanent consensus with the bourgeoisie, with all that flows from that.

The leader of the Italian social-democratic Right, Filippo Turati, once sighed, disillusioned: "How beautiful socialism would be without the socialists!" The formula is worth what it is worth; let's accept it as such. He had hardly finished pronouncing it than he made an offer to King Victor Emmanuel III to participate in a government, or even to head it, 'in order to block the road to fascism".

But one could not participate in such a government without sharing the command of the bourgeois army, without participating in the defence of public order by repressive methods (no doubt less violent than the fascists' methods, but repressive all the same), without participating in the administration of the Italian colonies, where terror reigned.

Because the willingness to "exercise power" has been manifested by social

democracy, with few exceptions, in the framework of imperialist bourgeois states. These states all had exploitative relations with the countries of the Third World. In addition, some of them were at the head of colonial empires that subjected the peoples of the Third World to cruel regimes of economic super-exploitation and political oppression.

It was impossible to maintain the consensus with the imperialist bourgeoisie, to govern or co-govern on that basis, without simultaneously sharing the responsibility of administering these colonial empires, with all that flowed from it.

Ramsay MacDonald, leader of the Independent Labour Party in Britain, subsequently leader of the Labour Party, dotted the 'i's' and crossed the 't's' before 1914. In a book that created a sensation and whose German edition carried a favourable introduction by Bernstein [145], he defended theses that were revolting from a socialist point of view. According to him, it was certainly necessary to "democratise" the British Empire, but it was also necessary to maintain it.

And the "democratisation" did not include according democratic rights of self-government to the "inferior races". These races were supposedly incapable of governing themselves. MacDonald even defended the pre-apartheid regime in South Africa. He went so far as to justify racial segregation in the South of the United States and the absence of political rights for Black people.

Political practice was in conformity with ideology. When MacDonald twice became Prime Minister of Britain in the 1920s, he maintained and defended the Empire, while implementing some minor reforms. When the colonised peoples began to rebel in order to conquer national independence, Labour governments continued the bloody repression begun under bourgeois governments, sometimes unleashing it themselves.

After 1945, the Attlee government prudently disengaged from India and Palestine, while causing the ravages of

partition. But at the same time, it sought to crush by military means the revolution in Indochina and the anti-colonialist revolts in Malaysia and Kenya.

The Popular Front government in France similarly maintained the French Empire and the repression that that implied. From 1944 onwards, French governments in which social democracy participated or which it headed unleashed large-scale colonial wars in Indochina, North Africa and Madagascar. The social-democratic leaders in the Netherlands acted in the same way in Indonesia.

Léon Blum tried to sum up social-democratic politics and strategy, in opposition to those of the communist parties, both before the advent of Stalinism and after its rise to dominance, in the title of a book published in 1945: *On a Human Scale* [Léon Blum, *A l'échelle humaine*, Gallimard, Paris, 1945]. On a human scale, the hundreds of thousands of deaths caused by the colonial wars and the continuing dire poverty in the "Third World"?

To be sure, all these horrors did not take place without meeting any opposition within international social democracy. There was reticence, there were protests and revolts. The French PS suffered a split in reaction to the bloody repression and the tortures in Algeria, co-organised by the "socialist" Lacoste and backed up by the "socialist" leader Guy Mollet. The Labour Left in Britain opposed Attlee's colonial wars, the Left of the Italian PS energetically opposed colonial wars. Swedish social democracy gave discreet support to the revolts of the oppressed. But these were very much minority reactions. The historic responsibility of social democracy as a whole is on this point too, a terrible one (...)

From "municipal socialism" to the "socialism" of nationalisations

The American socialist Daniel De

Leon, much admired by Lenin, called the reformist bureaucrats the "labour lieutenants of Capital". The formula is correct if we respect each of its terms.

The reformist bureaucrats are not part of the bourgeois class. They come from the working class and the organisations of the workers' movement. They defend their own interests when they institutionalise class collaboration. These interests coincide historically with the defence of the bourgeois order. They do not necessarily coincide at every moment with the defence of the immediate interests of the majority, or even the whole of the big bourgeoisie.

The reformist bureaucrats want to increase their "share of the cake". This increase implies some sacrifices on the part of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeois class certainly appreciates the fact that the reformist leaders contribute to the relative stability of the bourgeois order. But to what extent is the price that has to be paid justified in its eyes? The bourgeoisie is often hesitant and divided on this subject. That is why, in the inter-war period, social-democratic participation in government was only intermittent, except in Sweden and Denmark.

Red Vienna

On the other hand, municipalities administered by social democracy became more and more widespread. "Red Vienna" was the model for them. It is undeniable that they brought an improvement in the condition of the working class.

A new stage in the administration of the bourgeois state by social democracy began at the end of the Second World War. It saw the nationalisation of important sections of industry in Britain, France, Italy and Austria, and of the financial sector in the same countries (except in Britain). In Belgium, a bank of public origin, the Caisse d'Épargne, became the country's principal holder of bank deposits. Social democracy was jointly responsible for this evolution, and was even the main initiator of it in Britain and Austria.

There were also much longer periods

of ministerial participation, and even of entirely social-democratic governments, than before 1940. At the same time as the extension of nationalisations, there was the generalisation of social security laws in almost all the countries where social democracy participated in government. This legislation in its turn contributed to improving the condition of the working class, to a much larger extent than "municipal socialism".

Why was the bourgeoisie ready this time to pay the price? Some of the transformations corresponded to its own material interests. This was in particular the case of the nationalisation of the sectors of raw materials and energy, which were at the end of the day a form of subsidies to manufacturing and export industries. Other nationalisations corresponded to the principle of the "nationalisation of losses".

Radical reforms

But fundamentally, it was a question of reforms that tended to absorb the risks of social explosions that existed in these countries at the end of the Second World War. The war had exacerbated social contradictions and radicalised the popular masses. The bourgeoisie and its power structures emerged discredited by the whole of their conduct during the war.

Radical reforms were the minimum price to pay to avoid revolution. Social democracy saved capitalism as it had done at the end of the First World War. This time the Stalinist parties were jointly responsible, and in France, Italy and Greece they bore the main responsibility. But now the bourgeoisie was forced to pay a much higher price for services rendered than in 1918-1919. The period of economic expansion after 1949 facilitated the operation.

To all these reasons which explain the advance of reforms from 1944 onwards, must be added the influence of the Cold War. The bourgeoisie was obliged to create a socio-political situation in capitalist Europe that would reduce any attraction exercised by the Stalinist Soviet "model" and its export to Eastern Europe.

With the exception of some countries in Southern Europe, it had the material and political means to do so, with the help of the reformist leaders. These leaders had an apparently valid excuse for hitching their wagon to the locomotive of the imperialist bourgeoisie engaged in the Cold War. The Soviet bureaucracy had suppressed democratic freedoms in Eastern Europe. Was it not threatening to do the same in Western Europe?

Now, social democracy obtained its scraps of power and its privileges on the basis of bourgeois parliamentary democracy. So it is really attached to this democracy and to the democratic freedoms that go with it, even though it is ready to stretch them a bit, if maintaining the consensus with the bourgeoisie and the bourgeois order requires it. On their side, the working masses are deeply attached to democratic freedoms, and this attachment became even stronger after the Second World War, following the terrible experience of fascism.

But there was a way open for the social-democratic leaders to refuse to take on joint responsibility for the Cold War in Europe, while avoiding the Stalinist model: to opt for a workers' state based on the widest pluralist socialist democracy, maintaining and extending democratic political freedoms. They deliberately rejected this choice. They accordingly bear the responsibility, except in the neutral countries, of having supported the imperialist Cold War.

Managing the system

This responsibility was not a minor misdemeanour. It meant in particular the establishment of anti-worker and anti-strike repressive bodies, such as the CRS in France. It meant attempts to break strikes when the reformists were in power. It meant the responsibility of splitting trade unions, above all in France and Italy, under the direction of the sinister Irving Brown, financed by the CIA, splits for which the Stalinist communist parties and the Kremlin also bear their share of responsibility.

It meant participation in the Korean War, which cost several thousand dead and which took humanity to the brink of nuclear war. It meant the responsibility of the Labour Right in the fabrication of nuclear weapons in Britain.

But having said all that, it is nonetheless true that the period 1945-1970 led in the majority of the countries of capitalist Europe to the biggest rise in history of the standard of living of the working class. The conviction that it was useful and possible to fight for reforms, including radical reforms, spread among large sections of the working class and throughout practically the entire organised workers' movement.

The communist parties largely adapted to this situation. But in spite of the impact of Khrushchev's speech at the 20th Congress of the CPSU and the crushing by military means of the Hungarian Revolution, this neo-social-democratic evolution did not prevent these parties from maintaining on the whole their own identity and remaining hegemonic in the workers' movement in Italy, France, Spain, Portugal and Greece.

These two and a half decades therefore represent the apogee of the conquest of reforms and of the struggle for even more radical reforms. We only have to think of the programme of anti-capitalist structural reforms of the Renardist Left [146] and of the Socialist Left in Belgium. But that did not lead to an acceptance by the masses of Welfare State capitalism as the only model that was possible and desirable. Even less did it lead to the permanent disappearance of large-scale explosive mass actions, or even to growing passivity of the working class.

Those who reasoned in this way, in spite of the warning shots of the Belgian General Strike of December 1960-January 1961, made a big mistake, on the level both of analysis and of prognostic. They were spectacularly disavowed by May 1968 in France and by the hot autumn of 1969 in Italy.

The reality is that the working class did not feel that the improvement in

its living and working conditions was the result of the goodwill or the wisdom of the bosses. It considered it rather as the result of its own increased weight, in particular in the workplaces: you only have to think of the increased power of trade union organisation at plant level, which included elementary forms of workers' control. It often saw it as the result of its own struggles. It instinctively understood that the long post-war boom, by creating a situation of virtually full employment, had created a relationship of forces between Capital and Labour that was more favourable than during the two previous decades.

After 1968

And above all: economic growth itself, the real development of the forces of production, whatever might have been its negative effects, in particular from the ecological point of view, produced new needs for the mass of the working class, needs that the system was incapable of satisfying. Material needs, certainly, but also new needs for a quality of work and of life superior to those of Welfare State capitalism.

Ecological and feminist demands, demands for self-management and direct democracy, for solidarity with the struggles of the peoples of the Third World, emerged massively between 1968 and 1975. These were well and truly demands for a model of society that would be superior to Welfare State capitalism. The organised workers' movement, in its two main branches, the social-democratic branch and the branch of the post-Stalinist communist parties, proved to be incapable of giving expression to this historic aspiration during the seven years in question. That is what made possible the growth, although it was still modest, of political forces on their left.

Advent and dynamic of

"management socialism"

"Municipal socialism" and the "socialism of nationalisations" profoundly modified the social composition of the reformist bureaucracies. In the beginning they were recruited essentially from the mass organisations of the workers' movement, with which they broadly identified, although it was according to the logic: we are the organisation.



But the conquest of red municipalities led to the recruitment of professional administrators of public or mixed companies: electricity, gas, water; public transport companies; companies for building and managing housing, etc. In some countries, there were also administrators of hospitals and municipally-run educational institutions, as well as of public assistance bodies, or even administrators of unemployment funds, over which the trade union bureaucracy sought to establish its control.

To this vast para-state bureaucracy was subsequently added a part of the bureaucracy of the nationalised enterprises. The totality of this bureaucracy became a growing part of the social-democratic machine. It gradually became a majority in relation to the bureaucrats who came from the organisations of the workers' movement. This transformation led to important consequences concerning the priority objectives pursued by social democracy.

Public sector bureaucrats

The bureaucrats of the public sector had the mentality of functionaries. They tended to identify with the function and not with the organisation (which however enabled them to exercise it). What they sought above all was job security and advancement. Their material privileges depended on

it. The justification that was invoked for this new motivation of social-democratic apparatchiks was professional competence. It had to be demonstrated that social democracy was capable of running things better than the bourgeois parties. It was an argument that weighed heavily with the social-democratic leaders who presided over municipalities or ministries that were responsible for nationalised enterprises. It progressively asserted itself. It gave birth to "management socialism".

This evolution in priorities led progressively to transformations in several domains. The maintenance of positions of political power which made it possible to prolong the exercise of administrative functions became more and more an end in itself. It detached itself from the goal of strengthening the organisation from which, however, it flowed.

"Good management" was increasingly judged according to "technical" criteria, independently of its effects on the living conditions of the working class. But since the maintenance of "red municipalities" and of ministerial posts depends on the results of elections, winning elections at practically any price became in its turn an end in itself. In order to characterise this new type of behaviour, we could paraphrase Bernstein's formula: the elections are everything, the movement is no longer anything. These transformations only asserted themselves gradually. Social democracy's electoral clientele still remained essentially the working class. It was difficult to win votes from it without promising or offering something in exchange.

It is true that electoralism, and above all prolonged participation in government, also creates a phenomenon of clientelism, of electors who are assisted, who depend on subsidies and allowances from the state and are therefore predisposed to vote for those who distribute them. Nevertheless, the objectives of reforms did not quickly disappear from social-democratic preoccupations.

Even though within the social-democratic apparatus the

functionaries of the public sector became the majority, within the socialist parties the traditional members still dominated for a long time. The defence of the organisation as such continued to predominate in the leaderships of the parties. Management objectives must not come into conflict with that objective.

Gonzalez, Kinnock, John Smith

But nevertheless, gradually, this conflict took shape. This was especially the case following the prolonged presence of social democrats in power, which followed the end of the rise of revolutionary contestation from 1968-75. From then on, guaranteeing the permanency of power even at the price of a weakening of the party became an acceptable option, at least in a series of countries. This turn was expressed in a new conception of the party, made most explicit by Felipe Gonzalez in Spain, but also by Neil Kinnock and John Smith in Britain.

The socialist party was supposed to represent its electors and not its members. If its preoccupations and decisions came into conflict with what the leaders considered - often wrongly - to be the priority preoccupations of the electorate, these preoccupations had to be imposed, if necessary against those of the members, or even against what were obviously their interests.

The members were not taken in, especially when their immediate interests were at stake. They massively left the parties concerned. These parties became shadows of their former selves.

De-politicisation

The obsession with winning elections at any price did not in the first instance lead to substituting more right-wing policies for more traditional reformist policies. It resulted rather in a transformation of political life, which was, besides, wished for and pursued by the bourgeoisie. The political struggle was "de-ideologised", in other

words depoliticised. The confrontation of programmes, ideas, projects of society, was replaced by the confrontation between leaders. Advertising agencies "launched" candidates as one launches a brand of detergent, and increasingly came to dominate the election campaigns. This has been described as the emergence of a "democracy of the opinion polls". These polls were supposed to determine the preferences of the electorate. So the personalities who were more or less charismatic, most apt to represent these preferences, emerged, so to speak, automatically.

The reality was quite different. The electorate remained divided according to its opposing interests, in other words along class lines. If only because of their ultra-simplified and arbitrary character, the polls hardly expressed the real preoccupations of the different classes. The high number of abstentions indicated that the electorate did not really identify with this new way of conceiving politics. And above all: the candidates chosen were not the most charismatic or the most photogenic, not to mention the most competent. Their selection was the outcome of quarrels among different clans and of conflicts of interest, complex and not very transparent, within the parties.

We are of course dealing with a tendency and not a generalised reality. The social-democratic parties did not all embark on this road. Powerful counter-tendencies manifested themselves in many countries. But it nevertheless has to be recognised that a tendency in this direction affected social democracy as a whole, although to differing degrees.

Social democracy manages the long depression in a climate of easy money

Social-democracy was in a certain sense the inheritor of the 1968-75 wave of revolutionary contestation. When this wave did not end in victory,

a substantial sector of the masses replaced their hopes of radical changes with hopes of reforms. Social-democracy came forward to promise these. In Spain, it was able furthermore to offer the perspective of a peaceful liquidation of the dictatorship. The majority of former "leftists" approved, and adopted this choice. They joined the social-democratic current.

The socialist parties were then able to deploy all their ambitions to appear as the best managers of the economy (which was of course capitalist) and the state (which was of course bourgeois), insofar as they remained in government for lengthy periods.

But unfortunately for them, the period after 1975 remained one of a "long depressive wave" of the international capitalist economy [147]. Imprisoned by their desire to run the economy in a purely "technical" way, the socialist leaders approached the depression without any overall economic project that was fundamentally different from the project of big capital.

Indeed for a long time, they obstinately denied the reality of the depression, or minimised its extent. This led them to endorse the austerity policies advocated by the bourgeoisie. In the countries where they were in power, they took the initiative themselves in implementing these policies. The consequences for the working masses were serious. In Spain they were disastrous. Under the government of Felipe Gonzalez, the country had the highest rate of unemployment in the whole of Europe.

Prolonged participation in government after 1975 took place for the socialist parties in an economic climate that was marked, apart from the long depression, by the persistence of hyper-liquidity. The capitalist economy continued to be characterised by a rising rate of indebtedness. The total mass of floating capital took on colossal proportions. [148]

Considerable socio-economic changes flowed from this. A get-rich-quick mentality spread among important sections of the big and middling bourgeoisie. The appearance of the layer of "yuppies" partly expresses it.

Credit for the asking, cock-and-bull projects financed with other people's money, corrupt practices and generalised bribery were the result of this climate. In the socialist parties, the idea prevailed: since everyone is doing it, why don't we do it too?

Capitalist politicians enter social democracy

A second modification of its social composition favoured this moral degradation within social democracy. Attracted by the lengthy participation in government by the socialist parties, a series of capitalists, especially middling ones, began to enter the SPs. Their way of operating was substantially different from that of the technocrats. They sometimes embarked on large-scale speculative operations, hoping to be covered by the government. The personages of Th  ret in France, friend of Mitterrand, or of Maxwell in Britain, friend of Harold Wilson, are in this respect typical.

In the beginning, the individual corruption of socialist leaders did not come from these practices. They acted essentially with a view to financing the electoral campaigns and the apparatus of the party. The dramatic drop in membership increased the pressure in this direction. But in a society where more than ever money is king, the temptation to help yourself is very great. Some leaders escaped it, many succumbed. The most typical case is that of the leader of the Italian PS and former Prime Minister, Bettino Craxi [149].

The new social-democratic cadres of the functionary type gave birth to cold and authoritarian technocratic leaders, of whom Jacques Delors and Craxi are the typical representatives. The new cadres of "yuppie" origin are characterised by a pleasure-seeking life-style and by the squandering of public money. Jacques Attali and his management of the Bank responsible for providing credit to the countries of Eastern Europe is the perfect symbol of them.

Both types are indifferent to the effects of their behaviour on the masses and on the electorate. Experience has shown that they made a big mistake about that. It shows a contempt for the masses that is not so different from the contempt that characterised the Stalinist bureaucracy [150]. The masses instinctively feel it, just as they feel deep resentment at the growing corruption that has developed within the socialist parties.

The result is dramatic: a growing contempt for the leaders of these parties in many countries; a growing contempt for "politicians" in general. In the short term, these phenomena reinforce the tendencies towards depoliticisation. They risk creating a favourable climate for the far Right.

The reactions of the masses, faced with the corruption that has developed in many socialist parties, are fully justified. But it must always be remembered that the bourgeois parties, not to mention fascist and military dictatorships, are even more corrupt. It must especially be kept in mind that big capital is a source of corruption and that the corruptors are more guilty than the corrupted.

But the reactions of the masses are above all determined by the effects of social-democratic policies on their conditions of existence. Their main preoccupation is unemployment, as well as the fear of unemployment. The main priority in these conditions is to wage an effective struggle for a reduction of working hours without a reduction of the weekly wage: the 35-hour or even 32-hour week. The refusal of the social democrats to take this road is doubtless the fundamental cause of their political bankruptcy, the fundamental cause of their decline in Europe [151]

The collapse of working-class counter-culture

The effects of the depoliticisation that is encouraged by social democracy have been greatly reinforced by the collapse of working-class counter-

culture over the last few decades. The abrupt disappearance, a century almost to the day after its foundation, of the daily paper of the Austrian PS, Arbeiterzeitung, which was for a long time one of the best socialist dailies in Europe, is the symbolic expression of this.



Working class counter-culture: radical theatre, in post-1918 Germany.

One of the principal achievements of the mass workers' movement, first of all traditional social democracy and then the mass communist parties, was to organise a network of institutions that immunised an important section of the working class against the influence of bourgeois ideology, which is inevitably predominant in bourgeois society.

The press and socialist (later on, socialist and communist) books and pamphlets played the main role in this respect. But to the role played by the press has to be added the role of cultural institutions such as theatre groups, choirs, adult and youth brass bands, sports groups, etc. They developed among the working masses needs that bourgeois society had stifled. In her book *Introduction to Political Economy (Einführung in die Nationalökonomie)*, Rosa Luxemburg had rightly insisted on this real civilising role of the organised workers' movement.

The dykes that were thus built against the ocean of bourgeois ideology were undoubtedly fragile. The ideas that were spread by the socialist press and publications consisted most often of elementary vulgarisation. The understanding of Marxism was limited.

Social-democratic ideology contained quite a lot of petty-bourgeois influence and prejudices (one only has to think of the prejudices concerning women and of the ideas about sexual questions...). Later on, the Stalinist and post-Stalinist press, publications and institutions did the same. Nevertheless, the overall effect was to considerably limit the direct

ideological influence of the bourgeoisie within the working class. The development of class consciousness, of class political independence, of working-class solidarity, was powerfully stimulated.

In the same way, the progressive disintegration of these networks of working-class counter-culture greatly contributed to weakening the politicisation of the working class and to reducing the surface of collective class reactions. Its interaction with the new consequences of social-democratic practices is obvious. This regression has an objective basis: the re-privatisation of the leisure pursuits of the masses played a preponderant role. As a result the networks of collective existence loosened. Less collective existence led to less collective consciousness. Less collective consciousness led to less resistance to bourgeois ideology.

Ideological regression

This regression should not be generalised in an abusive way. Important centres of collective life remain, especially in workplaces and in the unions. The pressure of people's immediate interests is at the end of the day stronger than ideological mystifications. The breadth of mass reactions is witness to it.

Besides, it is possible to reconstitute the networks of counter-culture. Locally-based Christian groups have succeeded remarkably in doing so in a series of countries: in Europe this is especially centred on solidarity with the Third World, in the countries of the Third World themselves, especially around the immediate needs of the poor. The questions of ecology, feminism, anti-racism, anti-fascism and the fight against social marginalisation provide a favourable terrain for such reconstitution in a series of countries in Europe.

But it remains true that the social-democratic parties are no longer the organising centres of this possible and necessary renaissance of working-class and popular counter-culture. It is taking place essentially outside them.

Identity crisis

A prisoner of its technocratic turn, corroded by its successive doctrinal revisions and renunciations, dumbfounded by its electoral defeats, severely hit by its loss of a popular audience, a prey to deep internal divisions, social democracy is experiencing a profound crisis of identity. Its ideological disarray is painful to behold.

This is expressed in the first place by an inability to recognize the main aspects of reality such as it is and the challenges that it poses to social democracy, and indeed to all the tendencies of the Left. Faced with each of these problems, social democracy adopts positions that are deeply influenced by those of the bourgeoisie, suffering in addition from the incoherence of these positions, and losing a large part of their credibility as a result of the flagrant contradiction between words and actions [152].

What is the nature of the economic, or socio-economic, system in which we live? Many social-democratic leaders and ideologues deny that it is capitalist, capitalism being according to them a thing of the past. [153]

Is this simply a semantic quarrel? Absolutely not. In considering that the Golden Calf is still on its feet, we affirm at the same time that the laws of development of the capitalist mode of production still determine the main tendencies of economic evolution. That implies in particular that periodic crises of over-production are inevitable. Have we been mistaken about this, or has social democracy been at odds with reality?

Paradoxically, at the very moment when social democracy no longer knows how to define the society of which it is part, the capitalists, and not the least important of them, call a spade a spade and capitalism, capitalism [154].

Austerity

The policy of austerity, jointly advocated by the bourgeois parties

and the socialist parties, does not correspond to an unavoidable technical imperative. The priority given to the fight against inflation at the cost of social regression is not the only possible way to stop inflation. It is the only one that corresponds to the interests of Capital: attain a new rise in the rate of profit, encourage the accumulation of capital.

The necessary "opening up to the world", in other words the rejection of autarchy, does not in fact imply respecting the norms imposed by the IMF and the World Bank. There are other possible forms of international cooperation than those that favour the big banks and the multinationals. These alternative solutions correspond to the interests of the working masses. There is nothing scientific about affirming that they are "unworkable". At best that is dogmatic prejudice, at worst a capitulation to the interests of the bourgeoisie.

The incoherence involved here is sharply illustrated when we examine more closely the real functioning of the international economy. Far from being run according to the 'laws of the market', it is run according to the laws of "monopolistic competition", where all sorts of revenues are ensured by systematically erecting obstacles to the hallowed "free competition".

The claim, many times repeated by socialist ministers, that "there is no money" to effectively combat unemployment, given the extent of the budget deficit, has no scientific foundation. It is exactly the opposite that is true. Given the scale of public spending, it is possible to radically redistribute this spending in order to favour the re-establishment of full employment, without increasing the budget deficit, in fact even better, while reducing it.

It is true that that would imply a Draconian reduction of the internal debt, for example by bringing down to one per cent the interest on the bonds of this debt, except for small investors. A Draconian reduction of the military budget and of the money spent on the repressive apparatus would serve the same objective. It is not the money that is lacking. What is lacking is the

will to reorganise public spending in the interest of the working masses, as against the interests of Capital.

It is self-evidently spending on health and education that is in the long term the most productive, even from a strictly economic point of view, not to mention a social point of view. But the governments in which socialists participate are in the process of reducing this spending. The government of the Netherlands has just made a radical turn in this direction [155] The priority is not to reduce the budget deficit or the 'explosion' of spending on health. The priority is to reduce the budget deficit without putting into question the consensus with the bourgeoisie.

Fake arguments

The social-democratic leaders sometimes retort that there is not a majority of electors that is ready for such alternative policies. Let us accept that for the sake of argument, although the assumption is no way demonstrated: unemployment and the fear of unemployment occupy a preponderant place in the electorate's preoccupations. But even if the social-democratic leaders were right, the answer flows quite logically. Given the decisive importance under present conditions of re-establishing full employment, is it not preferable to fight in opposition for the realisation of this objective, combining extra-parliamentary actions with pre-electoral agitation, with the hope of winning a majority in the foreseeable future? For socialists to be compromised by government policies that maintain and increase unemployment - is that not to play the card of the greatest evil, not the card of the lesser evil?

Spreading structural unemployment is a cancer that is not only eating away at the well-being of the workers. It also leads to a growing threat of a new rise of fascism. Fascism feeds on the extension of the "dual society", on the development of social layers that are marginalized and de-classed. In the imperialist countries alone we can estimate the real number of unemployed today at 50 million [156]. This figure is likely to

make a new leap forward during the next recession.

The social-democratic leaders are sincerely opposed to neo-fascism, which could lead to their political and even physical disappearance. Already during the 1930s Albert Einstein, a quite moderate socialist, but a socialist all the same, affirmed: you cannot effectively combat fascism without eliminating unemployment. He was not mistaken.

But caught between their anti-fascist proclamations and their obsession with not breaking at any price the consensus with the bourgeoisie, the reformist leaders opt at the end of the day in favour of the latter imperative. Is this realistic? Is it not rather suicidal?

Recently, a veritable workers' revolt took place at Crotona, in Southern Italy, against the closure of the last important factory in the region. While manoeuvring to defuse the revolt, the government, including the socialist ministers, condemned the "workers' violence". But then the Archbishop of Crotona spoke out in solidarity with the workers and their families. Of course he did it for motives that we do not share, but nevertheless the archbishop proclaimed that it was inadmissible that the welfare of the workers and the survival of an entire region should be subordinated to the imperatives of profit and profitability [157]. What a pathetic spectacle: here we have an archbishop who expresses elementary socialist principles against socialist ministers.

Working week

The struggle for the 35-hour week and the 32-hour week, the struggle against the practice of the multinationals who exercise blackmail by threatening to re-locate jobs abroad, can only be effectively conducted on an international scale. The social democratic leaders present themselves as enthusiastic partisans of European unification. But when it is a question of countering the multinationals and their threats to re-locate centres of production, it is "sacred national egoism" that prevails. Every government in which socialists

participate, encourages the multinationals to behave in this way by showering them with concessions. The result is a foregone conclusion. Just as in the past, unemployment increases everywhere. Is this realpolitik? Is it not rather a fools' policy?

"Dual society"

The growth of unemployment, of the "dual society", of the fear of the most defavourised layers of the working class of dropping even lower down the social ladder, favours the rise of racist and xenophobic reactions. The far Right systematically exploits these reactions. The "respectful" Right just as systematically makes concession to them. But now the social democrats are going down the same road, for basely electoralist motives. They also want to limit immigration, deport immigrants, subject to a special regime people who are not "of native stock". Even though they are more moderate on this than the Right, what does that still have in common with traditional socialist values?

In the Third World, barbarism is spreading before our eyes. There are 1.2 billion poor. Hunger has taken on such dimensions that in Angola, for example, phenomena of cannibalism are spreading [158]. In Brazil, a new "race" of pygmies has been born in the Northeast, through the accumulated effects of several generations who have suffered malnutrition. [159]. According to UNICEF, another UN body, every year 60 million children in the Third world die as a result of hunger and easily curable illnesses.

Doctrinal incoherence of social democratic left

The social democratic ministers (and prime ministers and former prime ministers, like the late Willy Brandt) denounce these horrors, more or less pertinently. But in the exercise of their functions, they follow the rule: laissez

faire, let it pass. Even the minimum objective of devoting one per cent of national resources to the so-called "aid for the Third World" (in reality, nine times out of ten, aid to national export industries) has been attained practically nowhere. No question of cancelling the debt (including the interest on the debt) of the Third World towards the West. No question of reversing the evolution of the terms of exchange, which are a source of the permanent pillage of the third world. Once again: what does that have in common with elementary socialist values?

In order to rediscover a minimally coherent ideological identity, socialist leaders have reacted. We can give the examples of the Frenchman Michel Rocard, the leader of the Flemish FGTB unions Robert Voor Hamme, the Spanish ex-leftist Sole Tura, and especially Tony Benn, who is undoubtedly the most sincere among them. [160]

But doctrinal incoherence persists. They advocate a return to solidarity, but not unlimited solidarity. To want a supplement of solidarity, while maintaining a commitment to the market economy, therefore to profit, is like trying to square the circle [161]. The imperatives of austerity policies are not questioned, except by Tony Benn.

To complete the tableau, we have to add the demonstration of ideological aberration given by the Right (28). Professor Sachs and other Chicago Boys consider that the application of the policy of the IMF in Peru and Chile (as well as in Poland!) is a success: inflation has been stopped. But at what a cost of unemployment and massive poverty [162].

The Pope has unleashed veritable crusade against birth control and the use of condoms. Given the spread of AIDS, this is totally irresponsible. Alexander Solzhenitsyn is unleashing a full-scale attack on the ideas of the Enlightenment. According to him, these ideas are responsible for separating ethical principles from political and social practice [163].

This is a historical falsification equivalent to that produced by

Stalinism. So then, the tens of millions of dead that were caused by the Crusades, by the slave trade, by the extermination of the Indians, by the massacres of midwives (called "witches"), by the Inquisition, by the use of slave labour in plantations, by the wars of religion, (a quarter of the population of Germany wiped out), by dynastic wars - all phenomena that occurred before the century of the Enlightenment - were all the result of political and social practices dominated by ethical principles?

A series of Nobel Prize winners have gone back to mysticism and made science responsible for all the evils of our epoch [164]

Do we have to remind them that before the development of modern science, a quarter of the population died of plague in the 14th century? In an epoch when pandemics are spreading, which like cholera and tuberculosis are directly linked to the development of poverty across the world, it really is a case of a new 'betrayal of the intellectuals'.

But the fact that there are ideological aberrations much worse than the ideological disarray of social democracy hardly compensates for this disarray. It does not enable social democracy to surmount its crisis of credibility.

An uncertain future

After the 4th of August 1914, Rosa Luxemburg described the right-wing majority of social democracy as a "stinking corpse". She was not mistaken about the smell. It is even less pleasant in our epoch than it was in hers. But she was wrong about the survival of social democracy. It is still very much alive 80 years after this mistaken diagnosis, although it has been seriously weakened in a series of countries.

This survival can be fundamentally explained by three reasons.

First of all the isolation of Soviet Russia - a backward country - due to the partial failure [165] of the

international revolution in 1919-23, which was, besides, largely caused by the social-democratic Right itself. To this we have to add the growing inability of the Communist International and the communist parties to really undermine the hegemony of social democracy within the workers' movement in a large number of countries from the middle of the 1920s, with important exceptions like France, Italy and Spain.

Secondly, social democracy has in the main held on to its bases in the organised workers' movement, even if they have been seriously weakened. The case of New Zealand, where the entire trade union movement has broken its links with the ultra-right-wing Labour Party, is for the moment the exception and not the rule. The suicidal attempt by John Smith to break the organic links of the British Labour Party with the unions has absolutely no guarantee of success. Although the Spanish, French, Swedish and Belgian unions are partly taking their distance from social democracy, there is nowhere, for the moment, a rupture.

The very nature of social democracy explains the permanency of these bases. In order to be able to obtain the advantages that it covets, the social-democratic apparatus, even in its present phase of degeneration, must keep a minimum of autonomy in relation to big capital. Mitterrand, Felipe Gonzalez, Mario Soares, Neil Kinnock and John Smith, Scharfing and Lafontaine, Guy Spitaels and Willy Claes, are not on a par with the Agnellis, the Schneiders, the Empains, the Wallenbergs, the Thyssens, the lords of Indosuez, the masters of the City [166] (...)

The third reason for the survival of social democracy is the relative pertinence in the eyes of the masses of the argument of the lesser evil. They continue to think that Kinnock and John Smith are worth a bit more than Thatcher and Major, that Mitterrand and Rocard are not exactly the same as Giscard, Chirac and Balladur, that Scharfing, Rau and Lafontaine are worth a bit more than Helmut Kohl, that Felipe Gonzalez is not the same as his adversary of the centre-right,

even though the differences between all these personages and between the practical measures that they implement tend to become blurred, with all the serious consequences that flow from that.

If revolutionary Marxists reject the logic of the lesser evil, it is certainly not because they prefer the greater evil.

The reactions of the masses, which explain for a large part the survival of social democracy, are in the present situation part of the general crisis of the credibility of socialism. In the eyes of the masses, neither social-democratic reformism nor Stalinism and post-Stalinism, have succeeded in creating a society without massive exploitation, oppression and violence. On their left there has not emerged a third component of the workers' movement, sufficiently strong to be considered as politically credible in the foreseeable future.

In these conditions, the masses react to the most pressing problems, without turning towards global social solutions, towards "another model of society". Their reactions are often on a large scale, on an even larger scale than in the past [167].

But they are defensive reactions, fragmentary and discontinuous. They are therefore more easily channelled.

On the electoral level, there is no general tendency that dominates. (...)

More important than the electoral evolution, however, is the organisational evolution. All the social-democratic parties have been very much weakened in terms of the number of their members, without even mentioning their implantation in the workplaces, including those in the public services. Two of them have experienced splits, although minor ones. The split in the British Labour Party, clearly to the right, essentially led to a fusion of the splitters with the Liberal Party. The split in the French PS has led to the creation of the "Citizens' Movement" of Jean-Pierre Chevenement, whose dynamic is still uncertain.

But especially, in two countries, Italy

and the ex-GDR, there have emerged mass parties to the left of social democracy - the Party of Communist Refoundation and the PDS - with a certain echo among not insignificant layers of working-class electors. It is still too early to say what will be the future of these parties. But for the moment they represent a challenge on a mass level to social democracy (and to the post-Stalinist neo-reformists) such as has not been seen for a long time. (...)

Dialogue and contestation

In these conditions, revolutionary Marxists must combine in relation to social democracy, to use fashionable terms, a "culture of radical contestation" and a "culture of dialogue".

"Culture of radical contestation" means on the practical level to refuse to make any concessions to the logic of the electoral and governmental "lesser evil", which would imply an even limited acceptance of austerity measures, restrictions on democratic liberties, any concessions to xenophobia and racism. That means giving priority, under all circumstances, to the defence of the immediate interests and aspirations of the masses, to the unhindered development of their initiatives, their mobilisations, their struggles, their self-organisation, without subordinating them to any "superior objective", chosen and imposed in an authoritarian and verticalist fashion.

"Culture of radical contestation" means also on the level of propaganda to present as concrete and structured a global socio-political objective as possible. That means refuting all the "theoretical innovations" of social democracy and the new reformists, "innovations" which are ninety-nine times out of a hundred regressions to pre-Marxist positions that are 150 years old, if not more.

That means vigorously defending the capital of Marxism, but of a Marxism that is open, critical and self-critical, that is ready to re-examine everything in the light of the facts, but not lightly,

not in an unscientific way, not without looking at reality as a whole. Revolutionary Marxists have neither the arrogance to have an answer to everything nor the claim to have never been wrong about anything. But they are not ready to throw out the baby with the bath water. The theoretical and moral capital remains considerable. It deserves to be vigorously defended.

“Culture of dialogue” means engaging with social democracy, with every wing of it that is ready to, including parties as a whole, debates and confrontation whose aim is to

facilitate common actions in the interests of the working class and the oppressed.

These operations are certainly facilitated by a modification of the relationship of forces which would render too costly a peremptory refusal by the reformists. They can facilitate differentiation within social democracy. But independently of this logic, we have to fight resolutely for the dialogue to be engaged and pursued, so that a “third component” of the organized workers movement, to the left of social democracy and the new reformist parties, is de facto

recognised.

This objective is neither tactical nor conjunctural. It is strategic and long lasting. It is directly linked to a fundamental conception of the self-organization of the working class, which leads on to our conception of the taking of power (...)

To combine these two “cultures”, that is the task of revolutionary Marxists today in relation to social democracy.

21st September 1993



1976 - Trotskyists and Resistance in the Second World War

31 May 2005, by Ernest Mandel

From the foundation of the Communist International, communists were educated in a principled rejection of the idea of “national defence” or “defence of the fatherland” in the imperialist countries. This meant a total refusal to have anything to do with imperialist wars. The Trotskyist movement was educated in the same spirit.

This was all the more necessary with the right-wing turn of the Comintern and the Stalin-Laval pact in 1935, which turned the Stalinists in the West European countries, and in some colonial countries, into the worst advocates of pro-imperialist chauvinism.

In India, for instance, this led to the disastrous betrayal by the Stalinists of the national uprising in 1942. When the uprising took place, the British colonialists opened the jails for the leaders of the Indian Communist Party in order to transform them into agitators against the uprising and for the imperialist war. This tremendous betrayal laid the basis for the continuous mass influence of the

bourgeois nationalist Congress Party in the following decades.

Our movement was inoculated against nationalism in imperialist countries, against the idea of supporting imperialist war efforts in any form whatsoever. That was a good education, and I do not propose to revise that tradition. But what it left out of account were elements of the much more complex Leninist position in the First World War.

It is simply not true that Lenin’s position then can be reduced to the formula: “This is a reactionary imperialist war. We have nothing to do with it.” Lenin’s position was much more sophisticated. He said: “There are at least two wars, and we want to introduce a third one.” (The third one was the proletarian civil war against the bourgeoisie which in actual fact came out of the war in Russia.)

Lenin fought a determined struggle against sectarian currents inside the internationalist tendency who did not recognise the distinction between these two wars. He pointed out:

“There is an inter-imperialist war. With that war we have nothing to do. But there are also wars of national uprising by oppressed nationalities. The Irish uprising is 100 per cent justified. Even if German imperialism tries to profit from it, even if leaders of the national movement link up with German submarines, this does not change the just nature of the Irish war of independence against British imperialism.

The same thing is true for the national movement in the colonies and the semi-colonies, the Indian movement, the Turkish movement, the Persian movement.” And he added: “The same thing is true for the oppressed nationalities in Russia and Austro-Hungary. The Polish national movement is a just movement, the Czech national movement is a just movement. A movement by any oppressed nationality against the imperialist oppressor is a just movement. And the fact that the leadership of these movements could betray by linking these movements politically and organizationally to imperialism is a reason to denounce

these leaders, not a reason to condemn these movements.”

Now if we look at the problem of World War II from that more dialectical, more correct Leninist point of view, we have to say that it was a very complicated business indeed. I would say, at the risk of putting it a bit too strongly, that the Second World War was in reality a combination of five different wars. That may seem an outrageous proposition at first sight, but I think closer examination will bear it out.

First, there was an inter-imperialist war, a war between the Nazi, Italian, and Japanese imperialists on the one hand, and the Anglo-American-French imperialists on the other hand. That was a reactionary war, a war between different groups of imperialist powers. We had nothing to do with that war, we were totally against it.



Stalin's victory parade - Soviet troops dump Nazi standards at his feet

Second, there was a just war of self-defence by the people of China, an oppressed semi-colonial country, against Japanese imperialism. At no moment was Chiang Kai-shek's alliance with American imperialism a justification for any revolutionary to change their judgement on the nature of the Chinese war. It was a war of national liberation against a robber gang, the Japanese imperialists, who wanted to enslave the Chinese people. Trotsky was absolutely clear and unambiguous on this. That war of independence started before the Second World War, in 1937; in a certain sense, it started in 1931 with the Japanese Manchurian adventure. It became intertwined with the Second World War, but it remained a separate and autonomous ingredient of it.

Third, there was a just war of national defence of the Soviet Union, a workers state, against an imperialist power. The fact that the Soviet leadership allied itself not only in a military way - which was absolutely justified - but also politically with the Western imperialists in no way changed the

just nature of that war. The war of the Soviet workers and peasants, of the Soviet peoples and the Soviet state, to defend the Soviet Union against German imperialism was a just war from any Marxist-Leninist point of view. In that war we were 100 per cent for the victory of one camp, without any reservations or question marks. We were for absolute victory of the Soviet people against the murderous robbers of German imperialism.

Fourth, there was a just war of national liberation of the oppressed colonial peoples of Africa and Asia (in Latin America there was no such war), launched by the masses against British and French imperialism, sometimes against Japanese imperialism, and sometimes against both in succession, one after the other. Again, these were absolutely justified wars of national liberation, regardless of the particular character of the imperialist power.

We were just as much for the victory of the Indian people's uprising against British imperialism, and the small beginnings of the uprising in Ceylon, as we were in favour of the victory of the Burmese, Indochinese, and Indonesian guerrillas against Japanese, French, and Dutch imperialism successively. In the Philippines the situation was even more complex. I do not want to go into all the details, but the basic point is that all these wars of national liberation were just wars, regardless of the nature of their political leadership. You do not have to place any political confidence in or give any political support to the leaders of a particular struggle in order to recognise the justness of that struggle. When a strike is led by treacherous trade union bureaucrats you do not put any trust in them - but nor do you stop supporting the strike.

Now I come to the fifth war, which is the most complex. I would not say that it was going on in the whole of Europe occupied by Nazi imperialism, but more especially in two countries, Yugoslavia and Greece, to a great extent in Poland, and incipiently in France and Italy. That was a war of liberation by the oppressed workers, peasants, and urban petty bourgeoisie

against the German Nazi imperialists and their stooges. To deny the autonomous nature of that war means saying in reality that the workers and peasants of Western Europe had no right to fight against those who were enslaving them at that moment unless their minds were set clearly against bringing in other enslavers in place of the existing ones. That is an unacceptable position.

It is true that if the leadership of that mass resistance remained in the hands of bourgeois nationalists, of Stalinists or social democrats, it could eventually be sold out to the Western imperialists. It was the duty of the revolutionaries to prevent this from happening by trying to oust these fakers from the leadership of the movement. But it was impossible to prevent such a betrayal by abstaining from participating in that movement.

What lay behind that fifth war? It was the inhuman conditions which existed in the occupied countries. How can anyone doubt that? How can anyone tell us that the real reason for the uprising was some ideological framework - such as the chauvinism of the French people or of the CP leadership? Such an explanation is nonsense. People did not fight because they were chauvinists. People were fighting because they were hungry, because they were over-exploited, because there were mass deportations of slave labour to Germany, because there was mass slaughter, because there were concentration camps, because there was no right to strike, because unions were banned, because communists, socialists and trade unionists were being put in prison.

That's why people were rising, and not because they were chauvinists. They were often chauvinists too, but that was not the main reason. The main reason was their inhuman material living conditions, their social, political, and national oppression, which was so intolerable that it pushed millions onto the road of struggle. And you have to answer the question: was it a just struggle, or was it wrong to rise against this over-exploitation and oppression? Who can seriously argue that the working class of Western or Eastern Europe should have abstained or remained passive towards the

horrors of Nazi oppression and Nazi occupation? That position is indefensible.

So the only correct position was to say that there was a fifth war which was also an autonomous aspect of what was going on between 1939 and 1945. The correct revolutionary Marxist position (I say this with a certain apologetic tendency, because it was the one defended from the beginning by the Belgian Trotskyists against what I would call both the right wing and the ultra-left wing of the European Trotskyist movement at that time) should have been as follows: to support fully all mass struggles and uprisings, whether armed or unarmed, against Nazi imperialism in occupied Europe, in order to fight to transform them into a victorious socialist revolution - that is, to fight to oust from the leadership of the struggles those who were linking them up with the Western imperialists, and who wanted in reality to maintain capitalism at the end of the war, as in fact happened.

We have to understand that what started in Europe in 1941 was a genuine new variant of a process of permanent revolution, which could transform that resistance movement into a socialist revolution. I say, "could", but in at least one example that was what actually happened. It happened in Yugoslavia. That's exactly what the Yugoslav Communists did.

Whatever our criticisms of the bureaucratic way in which they did it, the crimes they committed in the course of it, or the political and ideological deviations which accompanied that process, fundamentally that is what they did. We have no intention of being apologists for Tito, but we have to understand what he did. It was an amazing thing. At the start of the uprising in 1941 the Yugoslav CP had a mere 5,000 active participants.

Yet in 1945 they took power at the head of an army of half a million workers and peasants. That was no small feat. They saw the possibility and the opportunity. They behaved as revolutionaries - bureaucratic-centrist revolutionaries of Stalinist origin, if you like, but you cannot call that

counter-revolutionary. They destroyed capitalism. It was not the Soviet army, it was not Stalin, as a result of the "cold war", who destroyed capitalism in Yugoslavia. It was the Yugoslav CP which led this struggle, accompanied by a big fight against Stalin.

All the proofs are there - all the letters sent by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to the Yugoslavs, saying: "Do not attack private property. Do not push the Americans into hostility to the Soviet Union by attacking private property." And Tito and the leaders of the Communist Party did not give a damn about what Stalin told them to do or not to do. They led a genuine process of permanent revolution in the historical sense of the word, transformed a mass uprising against foreign imperialist occupation - an uprising which started on an inter-class basis, but under a bureaucratic proletarian leadership - into a genuine socialist revolution.

At the end of 1945, Yugoslavia became a workers state. There was a tremendous mass uprising in 1944-45, the workers took over the factories, the land was taken over by the peasants (and later by the state, in an exaggerated and over-centralised manner). Private property was largely destroyed. Nobody can really deny that the Yugoslav Communist Party destroyed capitalism, even if it was through its own bureaucratic methods, repressing workers democracy, even shooting some people whom it accused of being Trotskyists (which was not true - there was no Trotskyist section in Yugoslavia then or at any time previously). And it did not destroy capitalism through some bureaucratic moves with a foreign army, as in Eastern Europe, but through a genuine popular revolution, a huge mass mobilisation, one of the hugest ever seen in Europe. You should study the history of what happened in Yugoslavia - how, as bourgeois writers say, in every single village there was a civil war. That's the truth of it. The only comparison you can make is with Vietnam.

So I think that revolutionaries should basically have tried to do in the other occupied countries what the Yugoslav Communists did in Yugoslavia - of course with better methods and better

results, leading to workers democracy and workers power directly exercised by workers councils, and not by a bureaucratized workers party and a privileged bureaucracy.

That is not to say at all that it was our fault if the proletarian revolution failed in Europe in 1945, because we did not apply the correct line in the resistance movement. That would be ridiculous. Even with the best of lines, the relationship of forces was such that we would not have succeeded.

The relationship of forces between the Communist parties and us, the prestige of the CPs, the links of the CPs with the Soviet Union, the low level of working class consciousness as a result of a long period of defeats - all that made it impossible for the Trotskyists really to compete with the Stalinists for the leadership of the mass movement. So the mistakes which were made, both in a right-wing sense and in an ultra-left sense, actually had very little effect on history. They are simply lessons from which we have to draw a political conclusion in order not to repeat these mistakes in future. We cannot say that we failed to influence history as a result of these mistakes.

These lessons were of a dual nature. The leading comrades of one of the two French Trotskyist organizations, the POI (which was the official section), made right-wing mistakes in 1940-41. There is no doubt about that. They started from a correct line essentially, the one I have just outlined, but they took it one step too far. In the implementation of that line they included temporary blocs with what they called the "national bourgeoisie".

I should add they were able to use one sentence by Trotsky in support of their position. Remember that before arriving too hastily at a judgement on these questions. This sentence came at the beginning of one of Trotsky's last articles: "France is being transformed into an oppressed nation." In an oppressed nation there is no principled reason to reject temporary, tactical agreements with the "national bourgeoisie" against imperialism. There are conditions: we do not make a political bloc with the

bourgeoisie. But purely tactical agreements with the national bourgeoisie are acceptable. We should, for instance, have made such an agreement in the 1942 uprising in India. It is a question of tactics, not of principle.

What was wrong in the position of the POI leadership was to make an extrapolation from a temporary, conjuncture situation. If France had permanently become a semi-colonial country, that would have been another story. But it was a temporary situation, just an episode in the war. France remained an imperialist power, with imperialist structures, which continued through the Gaullist operation to exploit many colonial peoples and maintain its empire in Africa intact. To change one's attitude towards the bourgeoisie simply in the light of what happened over a couple of years on the territory of France was a premature move which contained within it the seed of major political mistakes.

In fact it did not lead to anything in practice. Those who say that the French Trotskyists "betrayed" by making a bloc with the bourgeoisie in 1940-41 do not understand the difference between the beginning of a theoretical mistake and an actual treacherous intervention in the class struggle. There was never any agreement with the bourgeoisie, never any support for them when it came to the point.

Whenever strikes took place the French Trotskyists were 100 per cent on the side of the workers. Whether it was a strike against French capitalists, German capitalists, or a combination of both, they were on the side of the workers every time. So where was the betrayal? It just confuses a possible political mistake and an actual theoretical one - which eventually could perhaps have had grave consequences, but in actual fact never did. That it was a mistake I

naturally do not deny. But I think the comrades of the POI minority who fought against it did a good job, and by 1942 it was reversed and did not come up again.

The sectarian mistake, however, was in my opinion much graver. Here the ultra-left wing of the Trotskyist movement denied any progressive ingredient in the resistance movement and refused to make any distinction between the mass resistance, the armed mass struggle, and the manoeuvres and plans of the bourgeois nationalist, social democratic or Stalinist misleaders of the masses. That mistake was much worse because it led to abstention on what were important living struggles of the masses. Those comrades (such as the Lutte Ouvrière group) who persist even today in identifying the mass movements in the occupied countries with imperialism - saying that the war in Yugoslavia was an imperialist war because it was conducted by nationalists - are completely revising the Marxist method.

Instead of defining the class nature of a mass movement by its objective roots and significance, they try to do so on the basis of its ideology. This is an unacceptable backward step towards historical idealism. When workers rise against exploitation and oppression with nationalist slogans, you say: "The rising is correct; please change the slogans." You do not say: "The rising is bad because the slogans are bad." It does not become bourgeois because the slogans are bourgeois - that is a wrong and absolutely unmaterialist approach.

Trotsky warned the Trotskyist movement against precisely such mistakes in his last basic document, the Manifesto of the 1940 emergency conference. He pointed out that they should be careful not to judge workers in the same way as the bourgeoisie even when they talked about national

defence. It was necessary to distinguish between what they said and what they meant - to judge the objective historical nature of their intervention rather than the words they used. And the fact that sectarian sections of the Trotskyist movement did not understand that, and took an abstentionist position on big clashes involving hundreds of thousands or even millions of people, was very dangerous for the future of the Fourth International.

To abstain from such clashes on ideological grounds would have been absolutely suicidal for a living revolutionary movement. But we had no section in Yugoslavia. And had we had one, it would happily not have been sectarian. Otherwise we could not address the Yugoslav Communists and workers with the authority which we have today. Our first intervention in Yugoslavia was only in 1948; it was a good one, and so now we can speak with an unblemished banner and considerable moral authority in Yugoslavia.

But if the Lutte Ouvrière line had been applied in practice between 1941 and 1944 in Yugoslavia, and if Yugoslav Trotskyists had been neutral in that civil war, we would not be very proud today and we would certainly not be in a strong position to defend the programme of the Fourth International. As it is, some of the Yugoslav Communists who later became Trotskyists were heroes in the civil war, which gives them a certain standing and moral authority. It makes it easier for them and for us to discuss Trotskyism in Yugoslavia today. If we had to carry the moral blemish of passivity and abstention in a huge civil war, we would, to say the least, be in a very bad position today.

This article is an excerpt from the transcript of a school on the history of the Fourth International organised by the International Marxist Group in London in 1976.

1990 - Communism

31 December 2003, by Ernest Mandel



In 1840 the first 'communist banquet' was held in Paris - banquets and banquet speeches were a common form of political protest under the July monarchy.

The term spread rapidly, so that Karl Marx could entitle one of his first political articles of 16 October 1842 'Der Kommunismus und die Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung'. He noted that 'communism' was already an international movement, manifesting itself in Britain and Germany besides France, and traced its origin to Plato. He could have mentioned ancient Jewish sects and early Christian monasteries too.

In fact, some of the so-called 'utopian socialists', in the first place the German Weitling, called themselves communists and spread the influence of the new doctrine among German itinerant handicraftsmen all over Europe, as well as among the more settled industrial workers of the Rhineland. Under the influence of Marx and Engels, the League of the Just (Bund des Gerechten) they had created, changed its name to the Communist League in 1846. The League requested the two young German authors to draft a declaration of principle for their organisation. This declaration would appear in February 1848 under the title Communist Manifesto, which would make the words 'communism' and 'communists' famous the world over.

Communism, from then on, would designate both a classes society without property, without ownership - either private or nationalised - of the means of production, without commodity production, money or a state apparatus separate and apart from the members of the community, and the social-political movement to

arrive at that society. After the victory of the Russian October revolution in 1917, that movement would tend to be identified by and large with Communist parties and a Communist International (or at least an 'international communist movement'), though there exists a tiny minority of communists, inspired by the Dutch astronomer Pannekoek - who are hostile to a party organisation of any kind (the so-called 'council communists', *Rätekommunisten*).

The first attempts to arrive at a communist society (leaving aside early, medieval and more modern christian communities) were made in the United States in the 19th century, through the establishment of small agrarian settlements based upon collective property, communally organised labour and the total absence of money inside their boundaries. From that point of view, they differed radically from the production co-operatives promoted for example by the English industrialist and philanthropist Robert Owen. Weitling himself created such a community, significantly called *Communia*. Although they were generally established by a selected group of followers who shared common convictions and interests, these agrarian communities did not survive long in a hostile environment. The nearest contemporary extension of these early communist settlements are the *kibbutzim* in Israel.

Rather rapidly, and certainly after the appearance of the Communist Manifesto, communism came to be associated less with small communities set up by morally or intellectually selected elites, but with the general movement of emancipation of the modern working class, if not in its totality at least in its majority, encompassing furthermore the main countries (wealth-wise and population-wise) of the world. In the major theoretical treatise of their

younger years, *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels stated emphatically:

"Empirically, communism is only possible as the act of dominant peoples 'all at once' and simultaneously, which presupposes the universal development of productive forces and the world intercourse bound up with them. . . . The proletariat can thus only exist world-historically, just as communism, its activity, can only have a 'world-historical' existence."

And, earlier in the same passage:

"This development of productive forces (which at the same time implies the actual empirical existence of men in their world-historical, instead of local, being) is an absolutely necessary practical premise, because without it privation is merely made general, and with want the struggle for necessities would begin again, and all the old filthy business would necessarily be restored . . . (1845-6, p. 49)."

That line of argument is today repeated by most orthodox Marxists (communists), who find in it an explanation of what 'went wrong' in Soviet Russia, once it was isolated in a capital environment as a result of the defeat of revolution in other European countries in the 1918-23 period. But many 'official' Communist Parties still stick to Stalin's particular version of communism, according to which it is possible to successfully complete the building of socialism and communism in a single country, or in a small number of countries.

The radical and international definition of a communist society given by Marx and Engels inevitably leads to the perspective of a transition (transition period) between capitalism and communism. Marx and Engels first, notably in their writings about the Paris Commune - *The Civil War in*

France - and in their Critique of the Gotha Programme (of the German social-democratic party), Lenin later - especially in his book State and Revolution - tried to give at least a general sketch of what that transition would be like. It centres around the following ideas:

? The proletariat, as the only social class radically opposed to private ownership of the means of production, and likewise as the only class which has potentially the power to paralyse and overthrow bourgeois society, as well as the inclination to collective co-operation and solidarity which are the motive forces of the building of communism, conquers political (state) power. It uses that power ('the dictatorship of the proletariat') to make more and more 'despotic inroads' into the realm of private property and private production, substituting for them collectively and consciously (planned) organised output, increasingly turned towards direct satisfaction of needs. This implies a gradual withering away of market economy.

? The dictatorship of the proletariat, however, being the instrument of the majority to hold down a minority, does not need a heavy apparatus of full-time functionaries, and certainly no heavy apparatus of repression. It is a state sui generis, a state which starts to wither away from its inception, i.e. it starts to devolve more and more of the traditional state functions to self-administrating bodies of citizens, to society in its totality. This withering away of the state goes hand in hand

with the indicated withering away of commodity production and of money, accompanying a general withering away of social classes and social stratification, i.e. of the division of society between administrators and administrated, between 'bosses' and 'bossed over' people.

That vision of transition towards communism as an essentially evolutionary process obviously has preconditions: that the countries engaged on that road already enjoy a relatively high level of development (industrialisation, modernisation, material wealth, stock of infrastructure, level of skill and culture of the people, etc.), created by capitalism itself; that the building of the new society is supported by the majority of the population (i.e. that the wage-earners already represent the great majority of the producers and that they have passed the threshold of a necessary level of socialist political class consciousness); that the process encompasses the major countries of the world.

Marx, Engels, Lenin and their main disciples and co-thinkers like Rosa Luxemburg, Trotsky, Gramsci, Otto Bauer, Rudolf Hilferding, Bukharin et al. - incidentally also Stalin until 1928 - distinguished successive stages of the communist society: the lower stage, generally called 'socialism', in which there would be neither commodity production nor classes, but in which the individual's access to the consumption fund would still be strictly measured by his quantitative labour input, evaluated in hours of

labour; and a higher stage, generally called 'communism', in which the principle of satisfaction of needs for everyone would apply, independently of any exact measurement of work performed.

Marx established that basic difference between the two stages of communism in his Critique of the Gotha Programme, together with so much else. It was also elaborated at length in Lenin's State and Revolution.

In the light of these principles, it is clear that no socialist or communist society exists anywhere in the world today. It is only possible to speak about 'really existing socialism' at present, if one introduces a new, 'reductionist' definition of a socialist society, as being only identical with predominantly nationalised property of the means of production and central economic planning. This is obviously different from the definition of socialism in the classical Marxist scriptures. Whether such a new definition is legitimate or not in the light of historical experience is a matter of political and philosophical judgement. It is in any case another matter altogether than ascertaining whether the radical emancipators goals projected by the founders of contemporary communism have been realised in these really existing societies or not. This is obviously not the case.

From J. Eatwell, M. Milgate & P. Newman (eds.), The New Palgrave: A Dictionary of Economics, London 1990, pp.512-513.

1983: Vanguard Parties

28 December 2003, by **Ernest Mandel**



VI Lenin

To approach the problem of parties, party-building, and the necessity of the revolutionary vanguard party, is to

point to the peculiarities of a socialist revolution (or if you do not like the word "revolution," a socialist transformation of bourgeois society).

The socialist revolution is going to be the first revolution in the history of mankind which tries to reshape

society in a conscious way according to a plan. It does not go into all the details, of course, which depend on concrete conditions and on the changing material infrastructure of society. But at the very least it is based on a plan of what a classless

society has to be and how you can get there. It is also the first revolution in history which needs a high level of activity and of self-organization of the whole toiling population, that is to say, the overwhelming majority of men and women in society. It is from these two key features of a socialist revolution that you can immediately draw a series of conclusions.

You cannot have a spontaneous socialist revolution. You cannot make a socialist revolution without really trying. And you cannot have a socialist revolution commandeered from the top, ordered around by some omniscient leader or group of leaders. You need both ingredients in a socialist revolution: the highest level of consciousness possible, and the highest level of self-organization and self-activity by the broadest possible segment of the population. All the problems of the relations between a vanguard organization and the masses stem from that basic contradiction.

If we look at the real world, the real development in bourgeois society for the last hundred and fifty years (more or less since the origin of the modern labor movement), we again see this striking contradiction. It helps us overcome one of the main disputes about the working class and the labor movement which has been going on a long time, and which is right in the middle of the political debate today. Is the working class an instrument for revolutionary social change? Is the working class integrated in bourgeois society? What has been its real role for the last hundred and fifty years? What does the historical balance sheet tell us about these questions?

The only conclusion you can draw from the real historical movement is that by and large, in day-to-day life, what Lenin called trade union consciousness dominates the working class. I would call it elementary class consciousness of the working class. This does not lead to permanent, day-to-day revolt against capitalism, but it is absolutely essential and necessary, as Marx pointed out many times, for an anticapitalist workers' revolt to occur sometime. If the workers do not fight for higher wages, if they do not fight for a shorter workday, if they do not fight for, let us say it in a

provocative way, day-to-day economic issues, they become demoralized slaves. With demoralized slaves you are never going to make a socialist revolution, or even to acquire elementary class solidarity. So they have to fight for their immediate demands. But the fight for these immediate demands does not lead them automatically and spontaneously to challenge the existence of bourgeois society.

The other side of the story is also true. Periodically, the workers do revolt against bourgeois society, not by a hundred, five hundred, or a thousand, but by the millions. After all, the history of the 20th century is the history of social revolutions. Anybody who denies that should read the history books again, not to mention the newspapers. There has been hardly a single year since 1917, and in a certain sense since 1905, without a revolution somewhere in the world in which the workers participated in a rather important way. It is true that they did not always constitute the majority of the revolution's combatants.

But that is going to change because the working class has become a majority in society in practically all the important countries of the world. So periodically, the workers do revolt against bourgeois society, as the statistics of the last twenty years in Europe attest. There was a real workers' challenge against the basic setup of capitalism in 1960-61 in Belgium, in 1968 in France, in 1968-69 in Italy, in 1974-75 in Portugal, partially in Spain in 1975-76. And what was going on in Poland in 1980-81, if not a challenge against capitalism, was certainly a challenge for socialism. So this is a completely different picture from a permanently passive, integrated, bourgeoisified working class. More than 45 million workers have actively participated in these struggles.

The conclusion you can draw from these characteristics is that you have an uneven development of class activity and an uneven development of class consciousness in the working class. Workers do not strike every day, they cannot do that the way they function in the capitalist economy. The

way they have to live by selling their labor power makes that impossible. They would starve if they would strike every day. And they certainly cannot make revolution every day, every year, or even every five years, for economic, social, cultural, political, and psychological reasons which I have no time to spell out. So you have a cyclical development of class militancy and class activity which is partially determined by an inner logic. If you fight for many years and the fight ends with grave defeats, then you will not start fighting at the same level or a higher level the year after the defeat. It will take you some time to recuperate; it might be ten years, fifteen years, or even twenty years.

The opposite is also true. If you fight during some years with successes, even medium successes, you get momentum to fight on a broader and broader scale and on a higher and higher level. So we have this cyclical movement in the history of the international class struggle which we could describe in detail. Very closely combined with that uneven development of class militancy is an uneven development of class consciousness, not necessarily a mechanical function of the first. You can have high levels of class activity with a relatively low level of class consciousness. And the opposite is also true. You can have relatively high levels of class consciousness with a lower level of class militancy than one would have expected. I am talking, of course, about class consciousness of broad masses, of millions of people, not class consciousness of small vanguard layers.

Coming out of all these basic conceptual distinctions we can conclude the necessity of a vanguard formation nearly immediately. You need a vanguard organization in order to overcome the dangerous potential brought about by the uneven development of class militancy and class consciousness.

If the workers would be at the highest point of militancy and consciousness all the time, you would not need a vanguard organization. But, unfortunately, they are not and cannot be there under capitalism. So you need a group of people who embody a

permanently high level of militancy and activity, and a permanently high level of class consciousness. After each wave of rising class struggle and rising class consciousness, when a turning point arrives and the actual activity of the masses declines, consciousness falls to a lower level and activity falls to nearly zero. The first function of a revolutionary vanguard organization is to maintain the continuity of the theoretical, programmatic, political, and organizational acquisitions of the previous phase of high class activity, and of high working class consciousness. It serves as the permanent memory of the class and of the labor movement, memory which is codified, one way or another, in a program in which you can educate the new generation which then does not need to start from scratch in its concrete way of intervention in the class struggle.

This first function, then, is to assure a continuity of lessons drawn from the accumulated historical experience, because that is what a socialist program is: the sum total of the lessons drawn from all the experiences of real class struggles, real revolutions, and real counterrevolutions in the last hundred and fifty years. Very few people can cope with that and nobody, absolutely nobody, can cope with that alone. You need an organization, and given the world nature of this experience, you need both a national and a worldwide organization to be able to constantly assess that sum total of historical and current experience of class struggle and revolution, to enrich it by new lessons coming out of new revolutions, to make it more and more adequate to the needs of class struggles and revolutions going on right at this time.

There is a second dimension. It is the organizational dimension, which is really not solely organizational, but is, in reality, also political. Here we come to that famous question of centralization. Revolutionary Marxists stand for democratic centralism. But the word centralization is not to be taken in the first place as an organizational dimension, and in no way whatsoever is it essentially an administrative one. It is political. What does "centralization" mean? It means

centralization of experience, centralization of knowledge, centralization of conclusions drawn out of actual militancy.

Here, again, we see a tremendous danger for the working class and the labor movement if there is no such centralization of experience: this is the danger of sectorialization and fragmentation, which does not enable anyone to draw adequate conclusions for action.

If we have women militants engaged only in feminist struggles, if we have youth militants engaged only in youth struggles, if we have students engaged only in student struggles, if we have immigrant workers engaged only in immigrant worker struggles, if we have oppressed nationalities engaged only in oppressed nationalities' struggles, if we have unemployed engaged only in unemployed struggles, if we have trade unionists engaged only in trade union struggles, if we have unorganized, un-unionized, essentially unskilled workers engaged only in their own struggles, if we have political militants engaged only in election campaigns or in the publication of newspapers, and if each of them operates separately from each other, they operate only on the basis of limited and fragmented experience and they cannot (for basic, I would say, epistemological reasons) draw correct conclusions from their own experience. They have fragmented struggles, fragmented experience, fragmented partial consciousness. They only see part of the whole picture. The conclusions which they come up with will be, you can say a priori, at least partially wrong. They cannot have an overall, total correct view of reality because they see only a fragmented part of that reality.

The same thing is true, of course, from an international point of view. If you concentrate only on Eastern Europe, you have a partial view of world reality. If you concentrate only on the underdeveloped, semicolonial, dependent countries, you have a partial view of world reality. If you concentrate only on the imperialist countries, you have a partial view of world reality. Only if you bring together the experience of the

concrete struggles conducted by the real masses in the three sectors of the world (which are also called the three sectors of world revolution), then you have an overall, correct view of world reality. That is the big advantage of the Fourth International, because it is an international organization, which has comrades actually fighting, not only theoretically analyzing, in all these three sectors of the world, and it is concretely related to the struggles in all these three sectors of world revolution. This superiority is not due to the great intelligence of leaders of the Fourth International. It is just due to that elementary centralization of concrete experience of struggles on a global scale, added to a correct historical program.

That is what centralization is all about. It means that, I would not say the best because that is exaggerated, but at least good fighters in the unions, good fighters among unskilled workers and the unemployed, good fighters among oppressed nationalities, good fighters among women, youth, and students, good anti-imperialist fighters, good fighters in all these sectors of actually militant, oppressed, and exploited people in each state and on a world scale, come together to centralize their experiences in order to compare the lessons of their struggles on a statewide and worldwide scale, draw relevant conclusions, examine and reexamine in a critical way at each stage their program and their political line, in the light of the lessons to be drawn out of all these experiences, in order to have an overall view of society, of the world, of its dynamics, and of our common socialist goal and how to get there. That is what we call, in our jargon, a correct program, a correct strategy, and correct tactics. Given the uneven development of class consciousness, and the uneven and discontinuous level of class activity, this cannot be done by the masses in their totality. To believe otherwise is just a utopian and spontaneist daydream.

This can only be done by those people who claim for themselves the terribly "elitist" merit of being active in a more permanent way, in a more continuous way, than others. That is the only quality they claim for themselves, but it is a quality which is proven in life.

And all those who do not have that quality also prove it in practice by ceasing political activity. All those who do have that quality, however, continue to fight even when the masses periodically stop fighting, do not stop developing class consciousness when the masses do (anybody who challenges this right challenges an elementary democratic and human right), continue to elaborate politics and theory, and constantly attempt to intervene in society in a permanent and continuous way. Out of that "merit," however modest and limited it is, grow a series of concrete and practical qualities which then constitute the basis for the justification of a vanguard organization.

As I said before, there is a real contradiction in the relationship between a vanguard organization and the broader masses. There is a real dialectical tension, if we can call it that, and we have to address ourselves to that tension. First of all, I used the words "vanguard organizations"; I did not use the words "vanguard parties." This is a conceptual difference I introduce on purpose. I do not believe in self-proclaimed parties. I do not believe in fifty people or a hundred people standing in Market Square beating their breasts and saying, "We are the vanguard party." Perhaps they are in their own consciousness, but if the rest of society does not give a damn about them, they will be shouting in that marketplace for a long time without this having any result in practical life, or worse, they will try to impose their convictions on an unreceptive mass through violence. A vanguard organization is something which is permanent. A vanguard party has to be constructed, has to be built through a long process. One of the characteristics of its existence is that it becomes recognized as such by at least a substantial minority of the class itself. You cannot have a vanguard party which has no following in the class.

A vanguard organization becomes a vanguard party when a significant minority of the real class, of the really existing workers, poor peasants, revolutionary youth, revolutionary women, revolutionary oppressed nationalities, recognizes it as their

vanguard party, i.e., follows it in action. Whether that must be ten percent or fifteen percent, that does not matter, but it must be a real sector of the class. If it does not exist, then you have no real party, you have only the nucleus of a future party. What will happen to that nucleus will be shown by history. It remains an open question, not yet solved by history. You need a permanent struggle to transform that vanguard organization into a real revolutionary vanguard party rooted in the class, present in the working class struggle, and accepted by at least a real fraction of the real class as such.

Here we have to bring in another concept. I said before that the class is not permanently active and permanently on a high level of class consciousness. Now I have to introduce a distinction. The mass of the class is not, but the class is not homogeneous, not only because there are individuals who are members of different political groupings, at different levels of political awareness, under different influences of bourgeois ideology, but also because it has a differentiation going on within its own massive framework. There is a process of social and of political differentiation going on in the real working class all the time. There is a mass-vanguard distillation going on in the working class during certain periods. Lenin wrote a lot about it; Trotsky wrote a lot about it; Rosa Luxemburg, surprised as some of you may be, wrote a lot about it. People who have the ambition of being active in building revolutionary organizations, as I am, can give you the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of these vanguard workers in their own countries. It is not a mysterious question. It is a practical problem. Who are these vanguard workers in Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, West Germany? They are those who are leading real strikes, who are organizing trade union militant oppositions, who are preparing mass demonstrations and mass struggles, who are differentiating themselves from the traditional bureaucratic apparatus.

It is both a social differentiation and a political differentiation, although one can discuss the exact weight of each

element, which is not identical in each situation. But the layers as such are very real. The dimension of the layers are different in different periods. The "Revolutionary Obleute," as they are called in Germany, of the trade unions and the big factories of Berlin who were leading the November 1918 revolution and building the Independent Socialist Party, who afterwards moved to the Communist Party when the left wing of the Independent Socialist Party fused with the Communist Party at the Congress of Halle, were a very concrete layer in German society, not only in Berlin, but also in many of the industrial areas of the country. Everybody knew them, they were not an unknown quantity. They were tens and tens of thousands of people. If you look at the vanguard of the German working class fifteen years later, say around 1930-33, this layer had strongly decreased in number, but it was still there.

If you study Russia, you see the same thing. In 1905, everybody knew these people. They were those who were leading the strikes, the real mass struggles at rank-and-file levels against the czar. They were, in their majority, outside of Social Democracy before 1905, tended to come to Social Democracy during the 1905-06 revolution, and again partially left the party (Mensheviks as well as Bolsheviks) in the period of reaction. They reentered politics and grew on a massive scale in 1912 and especially with the beginning of the February 1917 revolution, and then, the majority of them were absorbed by the Bolshevik Party after April 1917, after the Bolshevik Party took a straight and clear line for "All Power to the Soviets," that is to say, for the dictatorship of the proletariat.

One can discuss whether the Bolsheviks became a vanguard party in the true sense of the word in 1912-13, or only in 1917. I would tend to say that they became that in 1912-13; otherwise it would have been very difficult for them to grow as quickly as they did in the spring of 1917. But that is just a point of historical analysis. The real notion is that of the fusion in real life between this vanguard layer of the working class, the real leaders of real struggles of workers at factory and

neighborhood levels, of woman's struggles, of youth struggles, of national minority struggles, and the political vanguard organization. When that fusion has taken place, at least in part, you have a real vanguard party, recognized as such by a significant minority of the class. It will then become a majority probably only during the revolutionary crisis itself, on the condition of following a correct political line. If you do not have that fusion, you have only the nucleus of a future vanguard party, you have a vanguard organization, which is a precondition for that fusion at a later stage.

This becomes a third dimension: the self-organization of the class. Self-organization of the class goes through different forms at different stages of the class struggle. The most elementary self-organizations are trade unions. Then you have mass political parties at different levels of consciousness, bourgeois labor parties, independent labor parties, and revolutionary workers' parties. Only under conditions of revolutionary crises do you have the highest level of self-organization; this is the Soviet type of organization, which is to say, workers' councils, people's councils, call them what you want, popular committees.

Why do I say highest? Because they engulf the great majority of the workers which generally, under non-revolutionary conditions, you find neither in trade unions nor in political parties.

Direct self-organization through a workers' council type of self-organization of the class is the highest form, not because I have a theoretical or ideological or moral or sentimental predilection for them-which of course I have-but for the simple, objective reason: they organize a much higher percentage of the workers and the exploited masses. Under normal conditions, unrestricted by bureaucratic apparatuses and leadership, they should organize up to 90 to 95 percent of the exploited masses, which you never find in trade unions or political parties. So they are the highest forms of self-organization.

Furthermore, there is absolutely no

contradiction between the separate organizations of revolutionary vanguard militants and their participation in the mass organizations of the working class. On the contrary, history generally confirms that the more conscious and the better you are organized in vanguard organizations, the more constructively you operate in the mass organizations of the working class. This means that you have to avoid the theoretical underpinnings of sectarianism, that you have to respect workers' democracy, socialist democracy, soviet or workers' councils' or popular councils' democracy, in a very thorough way. But this being said, there is no contradiction whatsoever.

Again, the only right you claim for yourself inside the unions, inside the mass parties, inside the soviets, is to be a more devoted, a more energetic, a more dedicated, a more courageous, a more lucid, a more self-denying builder of the unions, builder of the mass parties, builder of the soviets, defender of the general interests of the working class, without attributing to yourself any special privilege towards your fellow workers, except the right to try to convince them.

Our stance for working class democracy, for socialist democracy, for socialist pluralism, is based on a programmatic understanding that there are no contradictions between the interests of communists, vanguard militants, the working class, and the labor movement in its totality. There are no conditions in which we subordinate the interests of the class as a whole to the interests of any sect, any chapel, any separate organization. It is out of a theoretical understanding of that truth that we can fight enthusiastically, that we can fight with devotion and with deep understanding for the workers' united front, for a policy of unification of all different tendencies of the labor movement and the working class for common goals, because we believe that the victory of socialism is impossible without the victory of the fight for these common goals.

There is also a basic theoretical underpinning of this stance. We do not believe that Marxism is a full, final

doctrine, dogma, or Weltanschauung. We do not believe that the Marxist program, which embodies the continuity of the experience of the actual class struggle and real revolutions of the last one hundred and fifty years, is a definitely closed book. If you would believe that, then the best revolutionary Marxist would be a parrot who would just read by memory, or expect the answer having fed all the lessons into a computer. For us, Marxism is always open because there are always new experiences, there are always new facts, including facts about the past, which have to be incorporated in the corpus of scientific socialism. Marxism is always open, always critical, always self-critical.

It is not by accident that when Marx was called to answer the question in the drawing room game "What is your main life dictum?" he gave as the answer, "De omnibus est dubitandum" ("You have to doubt everything"). This is really the opposite attitude of the one which is so often stupidly and foolishly attributed to Marx, that he was building a new religion without God. The spirit to doubt everything and to put into question everything that you yourself have said is the very opposite of religion and of dogma. Marxists believe that there are no eternal truths, and no people who know everything. The second stanza of our common anthem, The Internationale, starts with the wonderful words, in French:

Il n'y a pas de sauveur suprême
Ni Dieu, ni César, ni tribun,
Producteur sauvons - nous nous
mÃªmes
Décrétons le salut commun.

In German it is even clearer:

Es rettet uns Kein hoh'ires Wesen,
Kein Gott, Kein Kaiser, Kein Tribun
Uns aus dem Elend zu erlosen,
Können wir nur selber tun.

Only the whole mass of the producers can emancipate themselves. There is no God, no Caesar, no unfailing Central Committee, no unfailing Chairman, no unfailing General Secretary or First Secretary who can substitute for the collective efforts of the class. That is why we try

simultaneously to build vanguard organizations and mass organizations.

You cannot trick the working class or "lead" the working class to do something which it does not want to do. You have to convince the working class. You have to help the working class understand collectively and massively the need for a socialist transformation of society, for the socialist revolution. That is the dialectical relationship between the vanguard party and the mass self-organization of the working class.

And that is why, for us, socialist pluralism, the debate, even when it takes an unhealthy and unhappy form of factionalism and bickering which gets on the nerves of all serious militants (I completely sympathize with them, because it is largely a waste of time), is an unavoidable price to be paid for keeping up that self-critical process. If nobody is, in advance, in possession of the whole truth and nothing but the truth, if each situation has always to be reexamined in a critical way against new experiences of working class struggle and of real revolutions, then of course you need criticism, you need the confrontation of different proposed solutions, you need variants. It is not a luxury just in order to be truthful to an abstract formula of workers' democracy. NO! It is an absolutely essential precondition for making a victorious revolution which will lead to a classless society.

Revolution is not a goal in itself. Revolution is an instrument, like a party is an instrument. The goal is building a socialist classless society. Everything we do, even today, even with shorter term perspectives like leading the masses in their day-to-day struggles, can never be done in such a way that it conflicts basically with the longer term goal which is the goal of self-emancipation of the working class, and self-emancipation of all the exploited, by building a classless society without exploitation, without oppression, without violence of men and women against each other. Socialist democracy is not a luxury but an absolute, essential necessity for overthrowing capitalism and building socialism. Let me give two examples.

We understand today the functional aspect of socialist democracy in post-capitalist society (the societies of Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam, and Cuba). Without socialist pluralistic democracy you cannot find correct solutions for the basic problems of socialist planning. No party can substitute for the mass of the people to determine what the mass of the people want as priorities in the form of consumption, the division between the consumption fund and the investment fund, between individual and collective consumption, between the productive and unproductive consumption fund, between the productive and unproductive investment fund, and so forth. Nobody can do that. Again, to believe otherwise is a utopian daydream.

And if the mass of the people do not accept your choice of priorities, no power on earth, even the biggest terror of Stalin, can force them to do the one key thing that you need to build socialism: have a constructive, creative, and convinced participation in the production process. There is one form of opposition that the bureaucracy has not succeeded in crushing. It is becoming bigger and bigger: the opposition which expresses itself by not caring about what is going on in production. You know the famous joke they tell in Eastern Germany: The journalist comes to a factory and asks the director: "Comrade manager, how many workers are working in your factory?" He answers, "Oh, at least half of them." This is reality in all the bureaucratized so-called socialist countries. No terror can overcome that. Only socialist democracy can overcome that, only pluralism, only the possibility of the mass of the producers and the consumers to choose between different, variants of the plan which conforms the most to their interests as they understand them.

Socialist democracy is not, a luxury and its need is not limited to the most advanced industrial countries. It is true of China; it is true for Vietnam. It is the only way to rapidly correct the disastrous effects of grave mistakes of policy. Without pluralism, without a broad public debate, without a legal

opposition, it might take 15 years, it might take 25 years, it might, take 30 years before you correct those mistakes. We have seen the historical record and it shows the terrible price the working class has to pay if you take such a long time before you correct your mistakes.

Mistakes in themselves are unavoidable. As Comrade Lenin said, the real key for a revolutionary is not that he avoids making mistakes (nobody avoids making mistakes) but how he goes about correcting them. Without internal party democracy, without the right to demonstrate, without the non-banning of factions or parties, without free public debate, you have great obstacles in correcting mistakes and you will pay a heavy price for this. So we are absolutely in favor of the right, to different tendencies, full internal democracy, and the non-banning of factions or parties.

I do not say the right to factions, because that is a false formulation. Factions are a sign of illness in a party. In a healthy party you have no factions; a healthy party from the point of view of both the political line and the internal party regime. But the right not to be thrown out of the party, if you create a faction, is a lesser evil than being thrown out and stifling the internal life of a party through excessive forbidding of internal debate.

It is not an easy question, especially in a proletarian party. The more revolutionary vanguard organizations are rooted in the working class, the less is their number of students and other non-proletarian members (I do not say that it is bad to have students or intellectuals; you need them, but they should not be the majority in a revolutionary organization).

The more workers you have in your organization, the better you are implanted in the working class, the more likely you are to come up with the concrete problems of the class. Within that general framework is to be placed the functional nature of a vanguard organization for the class struggle, for the revolution, and for building socialism. You should never forget that there is a strict dialectical

interrelation between the three. Otherwise we get off the track and we

do not fulfil the historical role which we want to fulfil: to help the masses, the exploited and the oppressed of the

world, build a classless society, a world socialist federation.

1971: Rosa Luxemburg and German Social Democracy

1 January 2003, by **Ernest Mandel**



Those writers who pigeon-hole her in this fashion create an impediment for themselves by approaching the history of the workers movement with essentially subjective criteria. In this way the merits of Rosa become - depending on the whim of the author in question - her uncompromising defence of Marxism against the revisionism of Eduard Bernstein, her deep attachment to the principles of mass action and spontaneity, or even her defence of workers democracy against Bolshevik "excesses".

The difficulty disappears as soon as we approach the history of the workers movement with objective criteria and apply the golden rule of historical materialism to Marxism itself: in the final analysis it is material existence which determines consciousness and not the reverse. We must start from the changing social reality in order to interpret the modifications which have taken place in the thought of the international workers movement, including successive contributions which have enriched or impoverished Marxism itself. With this method, Rosa's part in the evolution of the workers movement before 1914 (if not before 1919), instead of appearing atomised and fragmented, retains its unity. Only through such a method rather than the empirical approaches of narrative history and specialised research is the crucial importance of Rosa's theoretical and practical activity fully revealed.

"The Tried and Tested Tactic" in Crisis

For thirty years the tactics of German Social Democracy, "die alte bewährte Taktik" ("the tried and tested tactic"), had completely dominated the international proletarian movement. In fact, apart from the splendid isolation of the Paris Commune and the experiences of certain, mainly anarchist, sections of the international workers movement, the history of the class struggle had borne the social democratic stamp for half a century. Its influence was so preponderant that even those like Lenin and the Bolsheviks, who had broken in practice with this tradition at a national level, continued to regard the German model religiously as a model which was universally applicable.

"The tried and tested tactic" had a first class pedigree. During the last fifteen years of his life, despite significant vacillations, [168] Frederick Engels had become its champion even to the extent of making it a veritable deed in his "political testament": the "Introduction" that he wrote in 1895 to the new German edition of Karl Marx's *The Class Struggles in France 1848-50*. The most famous extracts from this "Introduction" were cited innumerable times in every European language between 1895 and 1914. And it was this path which social democracy followed from 1918 to 1929, when the world economic crisis and the crisis of

social democracy itself combined to put an end to this sterile exercise:

Everywhere the German example of utilising the suffrage, of winning all the posts accessible to us, has been imitated. Everywhere the spontaneous unleashing of the attack has retreated into the background... The two million voters whom it sends to the ballot box, together with the young men and women who stand behind...them as non-voters, form the most numerous, most compact mass, the decisive "shock force" of the international proletarian army. This mass already supplies over a fourth of the recorded votes...Its growth proceeds as spontaneously, as steadily, as irresistibly, and at the same time as tranquilly as a natural process. All government interventions have proved powerless against it. We can count even today on two and a quarter million voters. If it continues in this fashion, by the end of the century we shall conquer the greater part of the middle section of society, petty bourgeois and small peasants, and grow into the decisive power in the land, before which all other powers will have to bow, whether they like it or not. To keep this growth going without interruption until of itself it gets beyond the control of the ruling governmental system, not to fritter away this daily increasing shock force in advance guard fighting, but to keep it intact until the decisive day, that is our main task. (Engels: *Selected Writings*, edited by W. O. Henderson, pp 294-296. Our emphasis.)

Of course, we now know that the German Social Democratic leaders had scandalously censored Engels'

text and had twisted its meaning, removing everything that remained fundamentally revolutionary in the words of this old fighter and lifelong companion of Marx. [172]

Rosa was dazzled by the experience of the 1905 revolution, an experience which had struck a chord in the hearts of workers in several countries to the west of the Tsarist Empire - beginning with Austria, where it provoked a general strike that won universal suffrage. The last 14 years of Rosa's life thus became a sustained effort to teach this one fundamental lesson to the German proletariat: it is necessary to abandon gradualism, it is necessary to prepare for mass revolutionary struggles which are once again on the agenda. The outbreak of the First World War, of the Russian Revolution of 1917, and of the German Revolution of 1918 all confirmed the accuracy of the estimation she had made in 1905.

On the first of February 1905 she wrote:

But for international social democracy, too, the uprising of the Russian proletariat constitutes something profoundly new which we must feel with every fibre of our being. All of us, whatever pretensions we have to a mastery of dialectics, remain incorrigible metaphysicians, obsessed by the immanence of everything within our everyday experience... It is only in the volcanic explosion of the revolution that we perceive what swift and earth-shattering results the young mole has achieved and just how happily it is undermining the very ground under the feet of European bourgeois society. Gauging the political maturity and revolutionary energy of the working class through electoral statistics and the membership of local branches is like trying to measure Mont Blanc with a ruler!

She continued on the first of May:

This is the main point to grasp: we must understand and assimilate the fact that the actuality of a revolution in the Tsarist Empire will provoke a colossal acceleration in the tempo of the international class struggle so that even in the heartlands of "old Europe" we will face in the not too distant

future revolutionary situations and entirely new tactical problems.

Finally, in a confrontation with reformist syndicalists like Robert Schmidt at the Jena Congress on 22 September 1905, she cried out indignantly:

So far you have sat here and heard many speeches delivered on the political mass strike. Doesn't it make you feel like putting your head in your hands and asking yourself: are we really living in the year of the glorious Russian revolution or is it still decades away? Every day you can read the accounts of the revolution in the papers, every day you can read the dispatches, and yet you obviously have neither eyes to see nor ears to hear...Doesn't Robert Schmidt see that the moment predicted by our great teachers Marx and Engels has actually arrived? The moment when evolution becomes revolution! We have the Russian revolution right in front of our eyes. We would be fools if we didn't learn anything from it. [175] In 1905, at the Jena Conference, a clash broke out between the union leaders and the leaders of the SPD during which the union leaders went so far as to suggest that the supporters of the general strike should depart for Russia or Poland post haste to put their ideas into practice. [176] With reluctance, but not without vigour, Bebel entered the arena and attacked the union leaders, admitting the possibility of a mass political strike "in principle". However, a compromise was hammered out between the conferences of Jena and Mannheim. At Mannheim (1906) peace was restored in the central apparatus. Thereafter only the union chiefs were to be considered "competent" to "proclaim" strike action, including a mass political strike, after they had weighed up all the problems of "organisation", the funds available, the "balance of forces", etc. After the untoward intervention of an actual revolution in Russia, the SPD leaders heaved a sigh of relief and returned to the familiar and well-trodden paths of "the tried and tested tactic".

Throughout all this Rosa was, of course, furiously champing at the bit. She was just waiting for the most propitious moment to strike a decisive

blow for her new strategy and tactics. The moment dawned with the elections to the Prussian Diet in 1910, when agitation for universal suffrage was launched. The masses were demanding action and Rosa organised a dozen mass meetings aided by thousands of workers and militants. A police ban on the meetings led to skirmishes and finally a central demonstration of 200,000 was organised in Traptow Park, Berlin. But the SPD leadership hated these "disturbances" like the plague, and concentrated on preparing the best possible electoral intervention in the 1912 elections. Consequently the agitation was stifled at birth and this time it was Kautsky himself, the "guardian of orthodoxy", who took up the cudgels and led the theoretical and political struggle of the apparatus against the left. He produced countless pedantic articles and pamphlets which reveal, above all else, a complete failure to grasp the dynamic of the mass movement. [177]

At first sight a reversal of alliances had occurred. At the turn of the century, Rosa and Kautsky (the left and the centre) had blocked with the apparatus of the party around Bebel and Singer against the revisionist minority around Bernstein. In 1906, at the Mannheim Conference, the trade union apparatus went over to the revisionist camp and the Bebel-Kautsky-Rosa alliance seemed stronger than ever. So how then should we account for the sudden reversal in this system of alliances, which took place within the space of four years (1906-10)? In fact, the social and political realities of the problem differed decisively from the appearances. Bebel and the party apparatus were just as much enamoured of "the tried and tested tactic" in 1900 as in 1910. They were fundamentally conservative, that is to say supporters of the status quo in the heart of the workers movement itself (without having lost for all that their socialist convictions and even passions, but having relegated these to the province of a distant future). Bernstein and the revisionists threatened to upset the delicate equilibrium between "the tried and tested tactic" (that is, the daily reformist practice), socialist propaganda, the hopes and faith

of the masses in socialism, the unity of the party, and the unity between the masses and the party. For that reason Bebel and the apparatus opposed him; for essentially conservative ends so as not to upset the apple-cart.

However, the revolution of 1905 and the impact of imperialism on the relations between the classes in Germany itself aggravated the tensions in the heart of the workers movement. When the possibility of a split emerged after the Jena Conference, Bebel, Ebert and Scheidemann showed that they preferred the unity of the apparatus to unity with radicalising workers - that is how they interpreted "the primacy of organisation". From that moment on, the whole of the party apparatus broke with the left, because it was now the left who was demanding that "the tried and tested tactic" be jettisoned, not only in theory but also - horror of horrors - in practice. The die was cast.

The only question which remained open for a time was Kautsky's position. Would he side with the party apparatus against the left, or with the left against the apparatus? After the 1905 revolution he momentarily leaned to the left, yet a significant incident decided his fate. In 1908 Kautsky wrote his pamphlet *The Road to Power*. In it he examined precisely the question that had been left unanswered since Engels' famous preface of 1895. How does one pass from winning the majority of the working masses to socialism (by means of the "tried and tested tactic") to the conquest of political power itself? His formulas were moderate and did not imply any systematic revolutionary agitation. The question of the abolition of the monarchy was not posed (instead he modestly referred to "the democratisation of the Empire and its component states"). But even so there were too many "dangerous phrases" in this pamphlet for the small-minded, conservative and bureaucratized "Parteivorstand". The possibility of "revolution" was mentioned, it was even mooted that, "Nobody should be so naive as to imagine that we will pass imperceptibly and peacefully from a militarist state... to democracy". This was "dangerous phrase-mongering". It

might even "provoke a law-suit". And so the Parteivorstand decided to turn the pamphlet back into pulp. [178]

A tragi-comedy ensued which decided the fate of Kautsky as a revolutionary and a theoretician. He appealed to the Control Commission of the party, which found in his favour. But Bebel remained unmoved. Kautsky then agreed to submit to party censorship and to emasculate the text himself. He censored anything that might prove controversial and thus rendered the text completely anodyne, emerging from the whole affair as a completely spineless individual with no strength of character. Even in this episode one can see the seeds of his future break with Rosa, his centrism, his role as an apparatchik in the 1910-12 debate, his base capitulation in 1914, etc.

It is no accident that the acid test for Kautsky, as for all centrists, was the question of the struggle for power and the reintegration of revolution into a strategy entirely founded upon a daily reformist routine. Effectively, this had been the decisive question for international social democracy since 1905.

An analysis of the first draft of *The Road to Power* reveals that elements of centrism were present even before the bureaucratic axe fell. For although Kautsky perceptively analysed those factors leading to increasing class contradictions (imperialism, militarism, reduced economic expansion, etc), his fundamental philosophy was still that of "the tried and tested tactic": industrialisation and the concentration of capital are working for us, our rise is irresistible unless something unforeseen occurs... Such was Kautsky's reasoning, and the idea of abandoning passive fatalism was only entertained for those instances when "our enemies commit a foolish mistake" - a coup d'état or a world war. After all, matters had not progressed one inch since 1896, when Parvus first formulated the problem.

Revolutionary strikes and mass explosions were of no importance in Kautsky's *Road to Power*. Even the Russian revolution was only invoked to show that it opened an era of revolutions in the East (which was

correct), and that because of inter-imperialist conflicts the revolutionary period in the East would have profound effects on conditions in the West (which was also correct) and would undoubtedly exacerbate the tensions and increase the instability of bourgeois society. But no connections were made between the objective effects of the Russian upheaval in creating instability and the effects of the revolution on the activity of the proletarian masses of Western Europe. Political initiative, the subjective factor, the active element - these go completely by the board. "Await your enemy's mistake, prepare for zero hour by purely organisational means, be careful to leave the initiative to the enemy" - that is the sum total of the centrist wisdom of Kautsky in a nutshell! Later this was to be rendered still more profound by the Austro-Marxists - whose catastrophic failure did not burst upon the world until 1934!

Rosa's superiority is clearly revealed in every aspect of this crucial debate. To the dull rote of statistics with which Kautsky justified his thesis that "the revolution can never break out prematurely", Rosa counterposed a profound understanding of the immaturity of conditions which each and every proletarian revolution will know in its birth-pangs:

...these "premature" advances of the proletariat constitute in themselves a very important factor, which will create the political conditions for the final victory, because the proletariat cannot attain the degree of political maturity necessary to accomplish the final overthrow unless it is tempered in the flames of long and stubborn struggles. [179]

Rosa had written this as early as 1900, and it was here that she began to formulate the first elements of a theory of the subjective conditions necessary for a revolutionary victory, while Kautsky was still obsessed by an examination of purely objective conditions, to the extent of denying the very existence of the problems raised by Rosa! With her deep sympathy for the life and aspirations of the masses, her sensitivity to the moods of the masses and the dynamics

of mass action, Rosa was able to raise, as early as the debate of 1910, the crucial problem of proletarian strategy in the 20th century: the futility of expecting an uninterrupted rise in the combativity of the masses and the fact that if they were frustrated by a lack of results and a lack of leadership they would relapse into passivity. [180]

When Kautsky asserted that the success of a general strike "capable of stopping all the factories" depended on the preliminary organisation of all the workers, he pushed the "primacy of organisation" to an absurd point. History has shown that in this debate he was wrong and Rosa was right. We have known numerous general strikes that have succeeded in paralysing the entire economic and social fabric of a modern nation, despite the fact that only a minority of workers were organised. May '68 is only the latest confirmation of an old experience.

If Rosa is guilty of a "theory of spontaneity" (something far from proven) it certainly cannot be gauged from her judgements on the inevitability of mass, spontaneous initiatives during revolutionary upheavals (she was 100 per cent right on this point), neither in some illusion that these spontaneous initiatives would be sufficient for revolutionary victory, nor even that such initiatives in and of themselves would produce the organisation which would lead the revolution to victory. She was never guilty of the infantile misconceptions so dear to today's spontaneists.

What gave the "mass political strike" such an exceptional place in Rosa's schema was that she saw in it the essential means to educate and prepare the masses for the coming revolutionary conflicts (better still: to educate them and create the conditions which would enable them to perfect their education through self-activity). Although she had not elaborated a strategy of transitional

demands, she had drawn from the sum of past experiences the following conclusions: that it was necessary to break with the daily practice of electoral struggles, economic strikes and abstract propaganda "for socialism". For her the mass political strike was the essential means to break out of that very ghetto.

Confrontation with the state apparatus, raising the political consciousness of the masses, revolutionary apprenticeship... all this was seen from a clearly revolutionary perspective which foresaw revolutionary crises in a relatively short period of time. If it was Lenin who founded Bolshevism on the conviction of the actuality of the Russian revolution, if it was he who extended this notion to the rest of Europe only after 4 August 1914, then it was Rosa who merits the distinction of first conceiving a socialist strategy based on the same imminence of revolution in the West itself, directly after the first Russian revolution of 1905.

When Kautsky argued against Rosa that "spontaneous movements of the organised masses are always unpredictable" and for this reason dangerous for a "revolutionary party", he revealed the mentality of a petty jack-in-office who imagines that a "revolution" will run according to a carefully worked-out schedule. Rosa was a thousand times right to stress in opposition to this view that a revolutionary party, like Russian and Polish Social Democracy in 1905, distinguished itself precisely by its ability to understand and grasp what was progressive in this unavoidable and healthy mass spontaneity in order to harness its energy on the revolutionary goals that it had formulated and embodied in its organisation. [181] It took all the dogged conservatism of the Stalinist bureaucracy to dredge up again against Rosa the unfounded accusation that her analysis of the

revolutionary processes in 1905 placed "too much emphasis" on the spontaneity of the masses and "not enough on the role of the party". [182]

The fact that she had a realistic - and unfortunately prophetic - vision of the role that the bureaucracy in the workers movement could play in such a revolutionary crisis comes out in her speech to the Jena Conference in September 1905:

Previous revolutions, and especially those of 1848, have shown that in the course of revolutionary situations it is not the masses who must be curbed, but the parliamentary tribunes, to stop them betraying the masses. [183]

After the bitter experiences of 1906-10 she was even more precise when she returned to the same subject in 1910:

If the revolutionary situation comes to full bloom, if the waves of struggles are very advanced, then the leaders of the party will find no effective brake and the masses will simply push aside those leaders who stand in the path of the storm. This could happen one day in Germany. But I do not believe that in the interests of social democracy it is necessary or desirable to move in this direction. [184]

The unity of the work of Rosa Luxemburg

In the context of Rosa's "grand design" - to lead Social Democracy to abandon "the tried and tested tactic" and to prepare for the revolutionary struggles which she judged imminent - the totality of her activity acquires an undeniable unity.

Her analysis of imperialism does not only correspond to autonomous theoretical preoccupations, although these preoccupations were real. [