

# Bourgeois Violence and Proletarian Defence

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In the history of class struggle, particularly recently, the outcome of the politics of class compromise has always resulted, not just in the peaceful reconstruction of the “legal” apparatus of bourgeois rule, but also in the co-option and adaptation of “illegal” forces against the workers.

The two phenomena, despite appearances, operate perfectly in tandem. In both we see the renunciation of the struggle by working class bodies abandoning their attack on the historical basis of bourgeois rule.

If capitalist “legality” cannot be established, the weakness of the proletariat, its inability to pose issues in class terms, is precisely what allows the bosses to unleash with impunity the anti-worker violence of their illegal organisations.

The politics of compromise has therefore the twofold historical result of making it easier for capitalism to employ all the instruments of their rule, and to place the proletariat in the position of being unable to defend itself against these instruments by the very fact that it has relinquished to the state, to the “legal authority,” the task of defence that only an autonomous class organisation can exercise.

The situation today is exactly the same. The bourgeoisie, which has been able to reconstitute the broken mechanism of the state thanks to the loyal support of neo-reformist social-centrism<sup>[1]</sup>, prefers – in the absence of a direct threat – not to commit itself to a too blatant anti-worker repression. On the other hand bit by bit it is preparing and training armed bands of thugs<sup>[2]</sup> in the realisation that it has to both renew its domination over its class adversary, and be able to count on its “neutrality” (that is, in reality, tacit acceptance) regarding the reconstituted legal order.

Is it possible that this violence may be directed against the state apparatus, against the new-born institutions of the republic, as the opportunists of every stripe maintain? Not at all: it is directed against the workers and against the workers’ organisations, against the exploited peasants and the hungry of the South and against their basic organs of defence.

The democratic state is complicit and ... allows it to be done.

Obviously, these episodes and the recurrent outbursts of bosses’ violence are not just, as is generally said, to sow further alarm among the masses and thus induce them once more to inaction, paving the way for fascism. Fascism presupposes as its method, organised anti-proletarian violence, the failure of a social movement close to revolution, or one that has already peaked (as in the two classic examples of Italy and Hungary); it is the sadistic and brutal violence of those that have already defeated their enemy on the political level and now are proceeding to finish them off. In Italy today the situation is different. The proletariat has not been defeated,

because there has been no struggle. The violence, the outbreak of which is not a symptom of the vitality of the bourgeoisie (a vitality nourished by the oxygen sucked out of the class through the praxis of opportunism) is an expression of the lack of a revolutionary revival at the fall of the Mussolini regime. It is at the same time a warning that they are already preparing repression, to be held in reserve against an eventual return to action by the proletariat.

To us, as a party of the class, the phenomenon of this periodical recurrence of the bosses' violence concerns us in a very different manner than the socialists and the national communists. These two camps are exerting pressure to show that the republic is somehow "threatened." It is more pressing to us to indicate how the reinforcement of capitalist institutions has as its natural reflex the unleashing of violence that has only one real aim – the suppression of bourgeois society's class enemy – the proletariat.

The issue for us is not found in defending institutions that are not seriously threatened, but in how to defend the proletariat, the victim of both capitalist legality and illegality.

How should the proletariat defend itself against this new wave of violence? By appealing to the democratic state in order to make it respect the law? No, the law is bourgeois and its task is to defend the stability of bourgeois institutions. How do we remind the proletariat that the today's democratic republic has brought back the men, the methods, and the weaponry of 1920-22<sup>[3]</sup>? These are the ones who most effectively did the job of "camouflaging" the manoeuvres of the "squadristi"<sup>[4]</sup> with formal respect for the rules of the democratic game. It's the method of the Royal Guard<sup>[5]</sup>, of the judicial circulars that filed away the records of fascist crimes, of the police who (as in the days of the assaults on the workers' centres) arrest those communists that defend themselves and release those that attack them, of the more or less secret agreements of Giolittism and Nittism<sup>[6]</sup> with Mussolini and D'Annunzio. These are the methods, adapted to fit the times, of Pacts of Pacification<sup>[7]</sup>, of pledging solemnly to respect legality and, disarmingly, of the so-called neutrality of the state, of the defence of order with a capital "O," that is to say the order above classes, the order of one class – the bourgeoisie.

We are not motivated here by a polemic against personalities but by the analysis of certain constants taking shape in the dynamic of class struggle.

Fascism itself was established with the full cooperation of the liberal and democratic state because both always perform, and will always fulfil, a parallel function in defence of bourgeois society. The violence may just be sporadic for the ruling class. It may be found and continue to be found, at least physically, in the willingness of the majority of the working class to put up with it. It must guarantee the continuity of this support as long as possible.

It is not therefore in petitioning for protection from the state or forming blocs with political movements operating within the orbit of democracy and mobilising in "defence of the republic" that the proletariat will be able to defend itself against the shameless and unhindered exercise of the violence of the ruling class, but only through the class struggle, that is to say through strengthening the revolutionary party and by restoring class wide organisations, both of which have been missing until now.

The working class must draw the lessons from the events which years of accepting legality has prevented them from seeing; to understand that it is not legal bodies that will defend them, that

there is no neutral state nor higher justice to which we can appeal against the tyranny of the two forms of bourgeois violence, which are right and might<sup>[8]</sup>. The proletariat can only defend itself by creating its own organs of defence and offence.

On the level of the law or by appealing to “fair play,” the working class will always be beaten if it relies on the protection of the law and human rights that the state (or the church) may offer oppressed citizens.

It would be foolish to view the violence only in the brutality of this or that band of thugs, and not see in them the natural outcome of the politics of national solidarity that numb and confuse the proletariat in order to make it produce in silence.

So the problem of the defence of the proletariat against this second wave of capitalist attacks raises the political problem of regaining our class autonomy in the solid redoubt of the party, and that is only one aspect of the problem.

*Onorato Damen*

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## Footnotes

1. “Neo-reformist social-centrism” was a reference to the Italian Communist Party (PCI) headed by Togliatti who had carried on the war-time anti-fascist coalition with capitalism to assist in the formation of the Italian Republic (Togliatti became its Minister Justice for a brief time around the time this article was written). The PCI is referred to later as the “national communists.”

2. We think this refers to the formation of the Italian Social Movement (MSI) by former fascists in 1946.

3. The period of the rise of Fascism, which was accompanied by violence and the complicity of the Italian bourgeoisie. The “men” Damen is referring to are people like Enrico De Nicola who, having been in Mussolini’s coalition government in 1922, became President of the provisional Italian Republic from 1946-8. He is also thinking of Ivanoe Bonomi, who was Prime Minister of Italy in 1921 and then again in 1944-5 after the collapse of the Fascist regime in Rome. In 1921 he had proposed a “Pact of Pacification” to stop the street fighting between the Fascists and working class groupings known as the “Arditi del Popolo.” Although Mussolini signed the pact the other Fascist leaders ignored it. As Adrian Lyttelton concluded,

“The chief effect of the Bonomi circular was to encourage the Prefects to suppress the working class defence movement of the arditi del popolo” *The Seizure of Power* [Weidenfeld and Nicolson] 1973 p. 79.

4. “Squadristi” was the name taken by the Fascist gangs of thugs.

5. Set up by Nitti in 1919 to create an armed police to defend the bourgeois state against the threats of both Fascism and the working class it tended to act more harshly against workers but was dissolved at the end of 1922 by Mussolini to give even freer rein to Fascist violence.

6. Giovanni Giolitti and Francesco Nitti were 2 of the last 5 Prime Ministers of “Liberal” Italy before Mussolini took over. They colluded with Fascist violence against the working class in the Red Two Years (and in 1921 Giolitti gave the Fascists 25 seats in parliament from his coalition bloc’s quota after the Fascists had been humiliated in the general election of 1919. This gave Mussolini the launching pad for his “March on Rome.”)

7. See footnote 2 above.

**8.** i.e. the bourgeois state's legal system and its monopoly of violence.

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