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Perspective of Communism, part 4: How the proletariat organises itself to overthrow capitalism

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In the previous articles in this series, we have seen:

- why today communism is both a necessity not only to ensure the blossoming of humanity but also its simple survival;
- why, for the first time in history, this is no longer a simple dream, but that mankind has at his disposal the material conditions for taking this immense step forward;
- why man is really capable of living in such a society and making it work;
- why, despite all the alienation that weighs upon the consciousness of man, there exists a class in society, the proletariat, capable of transforming its struggle against exploitation and oppression into a struggle for the establishment of a new order that will abolish exploitation, oppression and all divisions into classes. In the present article, we are continuing this examination of the perspective of communism by looking at how the proletariat can organise itself to make the revolution.

For a long time revolutionaries, along with the proletariat as a whole, have groped for an answer to the question: how will the workers organise themselves to make the revolution? In earlier times (from Babeuf to Blanqui) small conspiratorial sects were in favour. Subsequently, different workers' societies, such as trade unions or co-operatives, like those gathered inside the International Workers' Association (First International founded in 1864) seemed to represent this self-organisation of the working class with a view to its emancipation. Then the great mass parties assembled in the Second International (1889-1914), and the unions attached to them, presented themselves as the lever for transforming society. But history shows that if these forms of organisation corresponded to stages of development in the capacity of the working class to struggle against exploitation, and to become conscious of the goals of this struggle, none of them were appropriate for the actual accomplishment of its historic task: the destruction of capitalism and the establishment of communism. It is when the historic conditions of capitalism itself put the proletarian revolution on the agenda that the working class found a suitable form of organisation to carry it out: the workers' councils. Their appearance in Russia in 1905 signified a turning point in the history of capitalist society: the end of its progressive epoch, its entry into decadence, into "the era of imperialist wars and proletarian revolutions" as revolutionaries subsequently understood it. Similarly, if since Blanqui revolutionaries understood the necessity for the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a lever for the transformation of society, the concrete form that this dictatorship would take only became clear with the experience of the class itself, and even then with some delay. Falling into step with the old conceptions of Marx and Engels, Trotsky, who nevertheless played a decisive role at the head of the Soviet (workers' council) of Petrograd, could still write in 1906, twenty-five years after

1871: "International socialism considers that the republic is the only form possible for the socialist emancipation, on the condition that the proletariat tears it from the hands of the bourgeoisie and transforms it, 'from a machine for the oppression of one class by another' into an arm for the socialist emancipation of humanity".

The workers' councils, the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat

Thus, for a long time, a 'real democratic republic' in which the proletarian party would play the leading role was seen as the shape and form of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It's only with the revolution of 1917 in Russia that revolutionaries, and in particular Lenin, understood clearly that the "finally found form" of the dictatorship of the proletariat is nothing other than the power of the workers' councils, these organs which appeared spontaneously from 1905 during the course of the revolutionary struggle and which were characterised by:

- their formation on the basis of general workers' assemblies;
- the election and revocability at any time of the delegates;
- the unity between the taking of decisions and their application (non-separation between 'legislative' and 'executive');
- regroupment and centralisation not on the basis of industry or trade but on a territorial basis (thus it's not print workers who come together as in the unions, but all the workers of a firm, a town, a region, etc who elect delegates to the workers' council of that area).

This specific form of organisation of the working class is directly adapted to the tasks which await the proletariat in the revolution.

In the first place, this is a general organisation of the class, regrouping all of the workers. Previously, all forms of organisation, including the unions, only regrouped a part of the class. While that was enough for the working class to exert pressure on capitalism in order to defend its interests within the system, it is only through self-organisation in its totality that the class is able to carry out the destruction of the capitalist system and establish communism. For the bourgeoisie to make its revolution, it was enough for a part of this class to take power; this is because it only constituted a small part of the population, because it was an exploiting class, and because only a minority of the bourgeoisie itself could raise itself above the conflicts of interests generated by the economic rivalries between its various sectors. On the other hand, such rivalries don't exist within the working class. At the same time, because the society that it is called upon to establish abolishes all exploitation and all division into classes, the movement that it leads is "that of the immense majority for the benefit of the immense majority" (Communist Manifesto). Therefore only the self-organisation of the class as a whole is up to accomplishing its historic task.

In the second place, the election and instant revocability of different officers expresses the eminently dynamic character of the revolutionary process - the perpetual overturning of social conditions and the constant development of class consciousness. In such a process, those who have been nominated for such and such a task, or because their level of understanding corresponds to a given level of consciousness in the class, are no longer necessarily up to speed when new tasks arise or when this level of consciousness evolves.

Election and revocability of delegates equally expresses the rejection by the class of all definitive specialisation, of all division within itself between masses and 'leaders'. The essential function of the latter (the most advanced elements of the class) is in fact to do everything they can to eliminate the conditions that provoked their appearance: the heterogeneity of consciousness within the class.

If permanent officials could exist in the unions, even when they were still organs of the working class, it was due to the fact that these organs for the defence of workers' interests within capitalist society bore certain characteristics of this society. Similarly, when it used specifically bourgeois instruments such as universal suffrage and parliament, the proletariat reproduced within itself certain traits of its bourgeois enemy as it cohabited with it. The static union form of organisation expressed the method of struggle of the working class when the revolution was not yet possible. The dynamic form of workers' councils is in the image of the task that is finally on the order of the day: the communist revolution.

Similarly, the unity between taking a decision and applying it expresses this same rejection by the revolutionary class of all institutionalised specialisation. It shows that it is the whole of the class that not only takes the essential decisions that concern it, but also participates in the practical transformation of society.

In the third place, organisation on a territorial basis and no longer trade or industrial expresses the different nature of the proletariat's tasks. When it was solely a question of putting pressure on an employer's association for an increase in wages or for better working conditions, organisation by trade or by industrial branch made sense. Even an organisation as archaic as the craft-based trade union was efficiently used by the workers against exploitation; in particular, it prevented the bosses calling in other workers of the trade when there was a strike. The solidarity between printers, cigar makers or bronze gilders was the embryo of real class solidarity, a stage in the unification of the working class. Even with the weight of capitalist distinctions and divisions upon it, the union organisation was a real means of struggle within the system. On the other hand, when it was a question not of standing up to this or that sector of capitalism, but of confronting it in its totality, of destroying it and establishing another society, the specific organisation of printers or of rubber industry workers could make no sense. In order to take charge of the whole of society, it is only on the territorial basis that the working class can organise itself, even if the base assemblies are held at the level of a factory, office, hospital or industrial estate.

Such a tendency already exists at the present time in the immediate struggle against exploitation. Here again there is a profound tendency to break out of the union form and to organise in sovereign general assemblies, to form elected and revocable strike committees, to spill over professional or industrial boundaries and to extend at the territorial level.

This tendency expresses the fact that, in its period of decadence, capitalism takes on a more and more statified form. In these conditions, the old distinction between political struggles (which were the prerogative of the workers' parties in the past) and economic struggles (for which the unions had responsibility) makes less and less sense. Every serious economic struggle becomes political and confronts the state: either its police, or its representatives in the factory - the unions. This also indicates the profound significance of the present struggles as preparations for the decisive confrontations of the revolutionary period. Even if it is an economic factor (crisis, intolerable aggravation of exploitation) which hurls the workers into these confrontations, the tasks which are subsequently presented to them are eminently political: frontal and armed attack against the bourgeois state, establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The proletarian revolution: political power as a basis for social transformation

This unity between politics and economics expressed by the organisation of the proletariat into workers' councils requires some elucidation. Which aspect is primary?

Communists since Babeuf have recognised that, in the proletarian revolution, the political aspect precedes and conditions the economic. That is a schema completely opposed to the one that prevailed in the bourgeois revolution. The capitalist economy developed inside feudal society, in the

chinks of the latter one could say. The new revolutionary class, the bourgeoisie, could thus conquer economic power in society while the political and administrative structures were still linked to feudalism (absolute monarchy, economic and political privileges of the nobility, etc.). It is only when the capitalist mode of production became dominant, when it was conditioning the whole of economic life (including those sectors which weren't directly capitalist, such as small scale agricultural and craft production), that the bourgeoisie launched its assault on the political power. This in turn enabled it to adapt the latter to its specific needs and lay the ground for a new economic expansion. This is what it did, notably with the English revolution of the 1640s and the French revolution of 1789. In this sense the bourgeois revolution completed a whole period of transition during the course of which it developed inside feudal society, until it came to the point of supplanting it on the basis of a new economic organisation of society. The schema of the proletarian revolution is quite another thing. In capitalist society, the working class possesses no property, no established material springboard for its future domination of society. All the attempts inspired by utopian or Proudhonist conceptions have failed: the proletariat cannot create 'islands' of communism in present-day society. All the workers' communities or cooperatives have either been destroyed or recuperated by capitalism. Babeuf, Blanqui and Marx understood this against the utopians, Proudhon and the anarchists. The taking of political power by the proletariat is the point of departure of its revolution, the lever with which it will progressively transform the economic life of society with the perspective of abolishing all economy. It is for that reason that, as Marx wrote: "Without revolution, socialism cannot be realised. It needs this political act, inasmuch as it needs destruction and dissolution. But here its organising activity begins and here its own aim emerges; its soul, socialism rejects its political envelope" (Poverty of Philosophy).

Inasmuch as capitalism had already created its economic base at the time of the bourgeois revolution, the latter was essentially political. The revolution of the proletariat, on the contrary, begins with a political act that conditions the development not only of its economic aspects, but also above all of its social aspects.

Thus, the workers' councils are in no way organs of 'self-management', organs for the management of the capitalist economy (ie., of misery). They are political organs whose primary tasks are to destroy the capitalist state and establish the proletarian dictatorship on a world scale. But they are also organs for the economic and social transformation of society, and this aspect makes itself felt from the very start of the revolutionary process (expropriation of the bourgeoisie, organisation of essential supplies for the population etc). With the political defeat of the bourgeoisie, the economic and social dimension will more and more come into its own.

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