



# **Socialism or Barbarism**

An introduction to the  
politics of the  
Communist Workers  
Organisation

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**This document is intended as an introduction to the politics of the CWO. By its nature it cannot be a full account. Its main point are explained more fully in our other publications (see below). Political correspondence is welcomed.**  
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# **Socialism or Barbarism**

## **An Introduction to the Politics of the Communist Workers' Organisation**

### **Preface**

Today the working class, not just in Britain, is faced with one of the greatest upheavals in its history. Capitalists everywhere are trying to restore profit rates. By restructuring whole industries and implementing technological innovation and lowering wages they are trying to maintain competitiveness on an increasingly globalised and vicious world market.

At the same time the international capitalist class has used the collapse of Stalinism to reinforce its ideological campaign against the working class: to try and discredit the very idea of communism and demoralise workers into believing there is no point in struggling. Yet the credibility of capitalist propaganda is continually coming up against the facts of material existence for the mass of humanity. Twenty per cent of the population in the so-called advanced capitalist countries live in the destitution and misery brought about by unemployment.

In Britain alone at least one quarter live below the official poverty line. An increasing share of the world's population is undernourished or starving, whilst farmers are growing so much food that it is being deliberately destroyed. At the same time, capitalism's production for profit is destroying the natural resources of the planet in an unsustainable fashion.

None of this is accidental, nor an 'Act of God'. It is a direct result of the way the capitalist system repro-

duces itself. Nearly 150 years ago Karl Marx wrote that capitalism comes into the world oozing 'blood from every pore'. Child labour, slavery, and slums all helped to bring unheard of profits to the owners of capital. But the horrors of early industrialisation are nothing compared with the genocide, wars and famines capitalism inflicts on the world today. The fight for communist consciousness depends first of all on understanding the real nature of present-day capitalism and on revolutionaries "understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement" (Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*).

If today the CWO is obliged to continue to swim against the political current, separated from the mainstream of the working class, there is no doubt that the material reality of life under capitalism is the basis for a turn of the tide. There is no doubt too that we are now much better prepared politically to point out that "line of march" of the working class.

Our politics are not just a product of our own reflections. Nor are they mere formulations to be learnt and repeated by rote. The ideas we defend are based on the historical struggle of the international working class to escape from capitalist exploitation during the last century and a half. These struggles have gone a long way towards clarifying both the nature of a future communist society and the organisations which the working class needs to create in order to achieve it. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the Stalinist legacy so recently dissolved in the former Soviet Union.

Our heritage is drawn from the revolutionary tendencies in working class history, starting from the Communist League of Marx down to the Third International which was built on the triumph of the Russian October Revolution of 1917. It continued with the Communist Left minorities who fought the degen-

eration of both the Revolution inside Russia and in the International in the 1920s. Consequently the CWO has always opposed the Trotskyist and Stalinist currents which are the products of the victory of the state capitalist counter-revolution in Russia. It is also why we can confidently assert that the collapse of Stalinism is no loss to the working class.

As internationalists the CWO participated in the series of International Conferences called by the Internationalist Communist Party of Italy (Battaglia Comunista) between 1977 and 1980. In these conferences we were convinced of the validity of the method and positions which the Italian comrades had evolved and defended since their foundation in 1943. In 1983 the two organisations formed the **International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party** around a common platform. Today this continues to coordinate the international efforts of the two organisations. The Bureau is for the Party but it does not pretend to be the Party. The creation of the future international party requires more than an effort of will.

Before the means of overthrowing the present rotten system and replacing it with a sane society are created that universally exploited class, the proletariat, will first of all need to return to fighting *en masse* for its own interests. When it does, we intend to be in a position where we can be heard. That is why the International Bureau aims to encourage the development of solid nuclei, potential constituent parts of a centralised and international World Party of the Proletariat. For anyone who wants to help humanity out of its present impasse there is no alternative because one thing is certain: all capitalism has to offer is a future of more crisis, more environmental devastation, more human misery and more war, ultimately a third global war.

Socialism or barbarism. There is no third road!

## **Capitalism: The System's Basic Contradiction**

The material basis of capitalist production is the exploitation of wage labour by the capitalist or bourgeois class which controls the means of production. The working class receives back only part of the wealth its labour creates in the form of wages. The remainder is appropriated by the capitalists and used by them as they see fit. Whether the productive apparatus is in the hands of private owners or in the hands of the state it is this appropriated surplus value which is the source of the capitalists' profits.

The central contradiction of capitalism is that between the social nature of production itself and the ownership and control of the means of production by one section of society. Although capitalism was behind the explosion of production known as the industrial revolution, this did not come about from capitalism's desire to improve the well-being of the majority of humanity. Capitalism doesn't produce to satisfy need. It exists to produce profit. It is not interested in producing goods that are useful but commodities that will sell at ever greater profits. Capitalists are thus constantly compelled to revolutionise the means of production. They are forced to invest some of their surplus value in new constant capital (i.e. machinery, buildings, raw material etc.) which, in turn, allows them to exploit wage labour more thoroughly (by sacking some and increasing the productivity of others). This enables the capitalist concern to raise its own profit rate above the average.

The average rate of profit is determined by the ratio of surplus value to the total capital invested. Increasing constant capital at the expense of variable capital (wages), only raises the organic composition of capital (the ratio of constant to variable capital). Since surplus value can only be produced by living labour this actually reduces the capitalists' profit rates. This does not mean that the actual amount of profit automatically goes down but that capitalism as

a whole experiences a tendency for the average rate of profit to fall.

Capitalism's main way of trying to overcome this is to increase the amount of commodities produced at ever lower costs in order to gain greater sales and maintain profits. This process creates a competitive struggle between capitalists. It also gives rise to the periodic crises of the capitalist system. When weaker (and generally smaller) capitals find they have insufficient surplus value to recapitalise their investment they either collapse or are taken over by stronger rivals. This happened at regular, approximately ten year, intervals in the nineteenth century.

*"This is in every respect the most important law of modern political economy and the most essential for understanding the most difficult relations." (Marx on the law of the tendency for the rate of profit to fall)*

These crises led to a devaluation of capital and so to a decrease in the organic composition which allowed the surviving capitals to recommence and extend the process of accumulation. Capitalist production became ever more concentrated and centralised. The search for cheap raw materials and investment in less developed areas (i.e., places with a lower organic composition of capital) offset the fall in the rate of profit, further expanded the world market and internationalised the capitalist mode of production until, by the turn of the century, a world economy had been created.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century capitalist competition was beginning to take on a new form. Production was increasingly dominated by huge capitalist monopolies and finance capitalist conglomerates. This growing concentration and centralisation of capital, the social problems produced by the class struggle and the need to defend national capital created a tendency towards increasing state regulation of the capitalist economy from the late nineteenth century onwards (tariff barriers increased enormously in the last two decades of the century). Capitalism had begun its life by breaking down feudal barriers and state controls, and by adopting

the idea of *laissez faire*. But this was already outmoded. Capitalist competition moved from the level of the firm to that between nation states. As well as being drawn into the regulation of the national economy, the state increasingly used military force to open up sources of raw materials and markets. In short, capitalism was moving into the epoch of imperialism.

## Imperialism

Imperialism is the stage capitalism reaches when the organic composition of capital is so high that access to cheap materials and opportunities to export capital to countries with a lower organic composition are essential to prop up the rate of profit in the capitalist centres. Imperialism is not therefore just a policy which the capitalists can alter as they wish.

Originally, imperialism was characterised by high tariffs, the scramble for colonies, for a “place in the sun”. In fact, Lenin was convinced that colonies were so much a part of imperialism he predicted that decolonisation would precipitate revolution.

However, the post-war end of colonialism in Africa and Asia did no such thing. Instead it was replaced not only by a new imperialist master, the USA, but by a new form of imperialism which some have called neocolonialism. Whatever its name, the fact is that the old imperialist powers abandoned the military costs of imperialism. It was more efficient for finance capital to use loans and ‘aid’ to maintain their position of strength in the world economy and prevent the emergence of new rivals. The mechanisms which the metropolitan<sup>1</sup> countries use to achieve their domination are varied, but the bourgeoisie of the peripheral<sup>2</sup> countries are obliged to join imperialism’s already-existing trade and financial set-up. Capitalists in the periphery may not have access to the same amounts of capital as their stronger capitalist rivals, they are motivated by the same drive to

*"... every national section of the bourgeoisie participates with equal responsibility and with the same historical destiny in the division of surplus value which is extorted internationally from the proletariat." (IBRP Theses on the Tasks of Communists in Capitalism's Periphery.)*

'maximise profits'. They play essentially the same role in exploiting their "own" proletariat, and even the world proletariat (via capital invested in Western government bonds, deposited in overseas bank accounts etc.) as the rest of the world bourgeoisie.

The inevitable result of imperialism is war: the continuation of economic competition by military means. An economic crisis of the nineteenth century type no longer devalues sufficient capital to allow a further cycle of accumulation. Only massive destruction such as that of a global war can do this. This is the real and objective function of world war in our epoch. Capitalists don't, of course, consciously opt for war for this purpose. But aside from any political or strategic reasons advanced the underlying motive for war lies in the nature of imperialist competition itself. As we have explained, imperialism is capitalist competition at an international level.

This means therefore that capitalism is now imprisoned in an infernal cycle of crisis leading to war (as intensified competition), leading to reconstruction (as a result of the reduced organic composition through devaluation), leading to crisis (as the organic composition increases again). During world wars capital devaluation is achieved by the massive destruction of industrial plant and the running into the ground of existing machinery which the suspension of international economic competition allows. Devaluation on such a scale allows accumulation to expand once again. That such wars are now necessary to maintain the system's health is a demonstration that capitalism's progressive role in history is over. The decisive evidence for this was the First World War.

The economic crisis opened with the US devaluation of the dollar in 1972. This was a sign that over-

accumulation had once again hit the world capitalist system. The crisis has now become the longest since the Great Depression of 1873-96.

Like its predecessor it has been punctuated by minibooms and ever deeper slumps. Like its predecessor, it lays the ground for imperialist rivalry and competing systems of alliances, each wishing to make its enemies carry the burden of the crisis. Until now however the capitalist class has managed the crisis to prevent either significant social upheaval or a total economic breakdown of the system. The cost of this has been a mounting state indebtedness which threatens to paralyse the entire system. The need for all states to cut this debt explains the vast number of cuts in support for industry and in social, medical and educational programmes. Capitalism has failed to either spend or cut its way out of the structural crisis of accumulation.

Another factor is that the process of concentration and centralisation of capital has reached global rather than state levels. The capitalist state has insufficient capital to be able to defend its own territory through nationalisations or subsidies. Instead of autarkic measures the capitalist state has had to create conditions to attract inward investment by the huge transnational corporations which control capital transfers that are fifty times greater than the world's total Gross Domestic Product. Globalisation has meant that the capitalist state has had to abandon efforts to support unproductive industry which it has subsidised for the past forty years. Hence unemployment has risen and wages have been driven down. The consequent tearing of the social fabric means that capitalism is already inflicting barbarism on wider and wider areas even before its own final solution to the economic crisis -

## **State Capitalism**

1914 signalled the fact that capitalism had entered its period of "parasitism and decay" (Lenin). This

was because centralisation and concentration of capital was now threatening important sectors of some national economies. The state was thus forced to intervene not only externally (imperialism) but also internally to regulate the worst social and economic effects of the system. This state capitalism has, like imperialism, gone through different phases but what is common to all is that the state plays a vital role in accumulation which was unthinkable in the nineteenth century. Increased tariffs (protectionism) and some limited forms of pensions and national insurance(so-called "state socialism") were the early forms of state capitalism but as the economic threat from an increasingly global tendency for the rate of profit to equalise threatened the "commanding heights" of each national economy the state's intervention has become more decisive.

*"Modifications to the proprietal form of the means of production have no revolutionary value if they are not the product of a radical change in the relations of force between the two antagonistic classes, that is of a revolutionary assault on power by the proletariat ...  
(Battaglia Comunista)*

This was further emphasised after the October Revolution in Russia in 1917. The October Revolution promised a new society run by working people through their own "soviet" or councils. The isolation of the Russian Revolution to a single country where the working class formed only a minority of society meant that the promise was never fulfilled. Although private property was abolished it was not turned into socialised property but nationalised property. Capitalist categories such as wage labour, money and exploitation continued to exist. A new collective exploiting class based on the careerists in the degenerated communist partyocracy dominated a new form of capitalist exploitation. The myth that the USSR was "socialist" and that nationalisation equalled socialism was now the illusion of the epoch. Only the Communist Left came to understand that the USSR was simply a different form of an essentially capitalist mode of production.

The idea that the state could regulate all the ills of the capitalist economy led to further state intervention in the Western bloc after 1945. The introduction of

welfare systems were designed to prevent workers struggling for a new society whilst nationalisation or subsidising of key industries which were in danger of collapse was seen as essential to the survival of every leading capitalist power. However the process of centralisation of capital did not stop at this point and when the crisis of the cycle of accumulation once more appeared in the early seventies this time it was posed as a crisis of the capitalist state itself.

## The Economic Crisis

*"The present crisis of world capitalism which developed in the late 1960s was preceded by a dramatic decline in the rate of profit."*  
*(Revolutionary Perspectives - precursor of CWO, 1975)*

The contradiction between capitalism's technical ability to meet everyone's needs with its drive towards war proves that the needs of the system are no longer compatible with the interests of humanity. It is on the basis of this materialist analysis that we conclude that the capitalist system is now a fetter to satisfying the wants of the world's population.

The capitalist cycle of accumulation has now become a cycle of wars. However much the capitalists try to stave off the effects of the crisis, however much they postpone their debts the retribution of economic slump will follow. Today, we are in the final part of the third cycle<sup>3</sup> of capitalist accumulation this century. The economic crisis which opened more than twenty years ago is a preparation for tomorrow's more general catastrophes. If the capitalist system is allowed to develop unchallenged it will once again plunge humanity into global war and barbarism. Communism is therefore not just "a nice idea" but a material necessity for humanity.

## Communism

Ruling class apologists wring their hands at the horrors which monopoly capitalism throws up but time and again declare that no alternative can exist. Marxist revolutionaries, basing themselves on the total history of human development and on the successive struggles between classes can expose that lie. Humanity can be saved from the horrors and misery of this decaying social system ... but only if the system itself is overthrown and replaced by one

based on human need rather than exploitation.

Such a system, the only alternative to world capitalism, can only be created by international working class revolution. That new system, humanity's hope, we continue to call communism, despite vilification by its open enemies, and its total misrepresentation by those who have misappropriated its name.

Although previous revolutions have merely substituted one form of exploitation for another, the communist revolution will be the first which abolishes all exploitation and oppression. This is because the working class, as the only collective producer class, can only be free by abolishing all classes.

Communism will destroy the capitalist state and end all national frontiers. It will abolish money, wage labour and commodity production. Communism is the abolition of private property in the sense of control over the means of production by a special class of people. Private ownership of the means of production can now only be abolished by transforming it into social property, the property of the whole of society, and, at the same time, transforming society into a society of free producers controlling those means of production. Communism is thus synonymous with the liberation of the working class from conditions of exploitation. This liberation can only be the task of the working class itself.

### **The Road to Communism: The Working Class**

Whilst the economic contradictions of the capitalist system bring one economic crisis after another the system will not collapse "automatically". The overthrow of the capitalist system can only be carried out by the one class which is globally exploited - the working class. By "working class" we do not simply mean that class of manual production worker so beloved of the dinosaurs of the old Labour movement. For us all wage workers whose work assumes the forms of factory production (i.e. parcellised, al-

*By proletariat [is meant] the class of modern wage-labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live." (Engels' note in Communist Manifesto)*

ienated and rationalised labour) can be said to be members of the working class. This class is an indispensable element of the capitalist mode of production. As Marx stated "Wage labour begets capital, capital begets wage labour". But at the same time the working class, as the collective producer class which is denied access to the full fruits of its labour, is also the "gravedigger of capitalist society".

This is well understood by the capitalists who never tire of wishing away the class struggle. When capitalism booms we are told (by Bernsteins, Burnhams and Marcuses) that the working class no longer exists since rising living standards have "embourgeoised" the workers. When capitalism is in crisis we are told (by Gorz, Hobsbawm et. al.) that the working class no longer exists because the latest technology has made it obsolete. In times of class quiet such theories seem to be confirmed only to constantly receive their refutation with a new wave of struggle.

### **The Economic Struggle of the Working Class**

As the crisis continues the bourgeoisie is forced more and more to attack the working class. In the long-term, capitalism offers war, but the short-term future capitalism has for the working class is one in which fewer and fewer workers have jobs, and those who have work have it in ever greater quantity, receiving proportionately lower and lower wages.

The working class may retreat in the face of the capitalist onslaught at any given moment but the very nature of capitalist production forces it from time to time to revolt against capitalist exploitation. This struggle will not be without its victories, so long as the working class achieves the unity necessary to fight back. The significance of these victories must neither be underestimated nor overestimated. They are essential to allow the working class to rediscover its collective power as a class, as well as to the material interests of the class, but they can not solve

the capitalist crisis. Any economic victory can only be temporary. The real defence of workers' interests implies challenging the system which exploits them and which only survives at their expense.

### **Class Consciousness**

Although capitalism will inflict economic crisis and global war on humanity, it will not simply collapse of its own accord. It can only be replaced by a superior way of producing the necessities of life, that is, by communism. But communism cannot come about automatically. It has to be the self-conscious act of millions of workers throughout the world. This in itself expresses the historical challenge which is unique to the proletarian revolution.

The capitalist class, the bourgeoisie, was able to develop capitalist relations of production under feudalism by fighting to defend free trade, a free labour market and by struggling to end feudal restrictions (guild laws and mercantile monopolies etc.), so that every step in the economic development of the bourgeoisie "was accompanied by a corresponding political advance of that class" (Marx). Eventually, the bourgeois conception of property came to dominate the state and the bourgeoisie became the dominant class.

Unlike the capitalist class, the proletariat, the wage labouring class, is propertyless. It has no system of property to defend. This means that communist institutions cannot be built up inside the old mode of production. First must come the political revolution which transfers power from the minority of capitalists to the proletarian majority. Only once the working class has begun to establish its political domination can it also begin the work of economic transformation.

Any other road is simply reformism. But this poses a number of problems. If, as Marx stated, "the dominant ideas in any epoch are the ideas of the

*"The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it."*  
*(Marx)*

ruling class" (*The German Ideology*), how can the working class become aware of the need to destroy the capitalist system and replace it with communism? As long as the capitalists can manage their inevitable economic crises, as long as the capitalist class remains largely united in the face of working class resistance, as long as capitalism can recuperate workers' struggles onto grounds consistent with capitalism, they can continue to rule relatively securely.

Capitalist control of the means of reproduction of ideas (the media, schools etc.) under these conditions will appear totalitarian in its domination. This domination is, however, conditional and always faces challenges. The class struggle, although often hidden in certain periods of history, never goes away. It bursts out from time to time and, under certain conditions, even reaches insurrectionary proportions as in the Paris June Days of 1848, the Paris Commune of 1871, the mass strikes and revolutions in Europe in 1904-5 and in the Russian Revolutions of 1917.

However, insurrections alone are not enough. Unless the working class is already prepared and has its own programme, the various forces of the bourgeoisie will step in to provide a pseudo-radical leadership which will interpret events for the workers in capitalist terms. History has shown that even the workers involved can forget the lessons of their own experience unless they give an organised political expression to these lessons.

Nor will all workers have the same experiences. Some workers are going to arrive at communist consciousness in advance of others. These factors explain the fundamental necessity for the working class to form a political party.

## The Party

Such a party will consist of the organisation of the most politically advanced members of the working class and those who identify with that class, and its basic task will be to provide political and theoretical leadership. This kind of leadership could not be more different from that supplied by bourgeois parties. Instead of demanding unthinking obedience (either at the ballot box or in accepting the purely organisational diktats of a "leadership clique"), it requires its members to actively develop the understanding of the communist programme amongst the broadest possible sections of the working class.

Although the party will also have an organisational part to play, this springs from its political role. For example, as the conditions for revolution develop, the revolutionary organisation is duty-bound to make preliminary preparations for it, even though it cannot (and should not try to) make the insurrection itself in the place of the mass of the working class. The party cannot take power on behalf of the working class.

*"At no time, and for no reason, does the proletariat abandon its combative role: It does not delegate to others its historical mission, and it does not delegate its power away by proxy, not even to its class party." (Platform of the Internationalist Communist Party)*

The communist revolution is the product of the immense majority of the working class. It will begin with a political revolution where communist politics will continually have to be fought for in the class-wide bodies of the workers, such as the soviets, which are the basis of the revolutionary proletarian state. The party will actively participate in this struggle at every level, though it will remain organisationally distinct. It alone cannot take on the task which belongs to the proletariat as a whole. In the event of a setback in the revolutionary process, the party may well find itself in a minority in the soviets. In such a case its task will be to defend the communist programme against the influence of reactionary elements inside the working class.

The party must be international because in the present era workers of all countries are oppressed by a common system of exploitation. The working

class has to overcome the national divisions capitalism promotes between workers, if for no other reason that the communist revolution needs to be international to survive. The world party of the proletariat will put forward and defend the programme of freedom for the entire working class. This is based on the revolutionary theories first expressed by Marx and Engels, and subsequently developed during 150 years of class struggle.

The party will aim to regroup all revolutionary workers within every area of capitalist society. Its first task is to wrench the workers away from the reactionary influences of nationalism, Stalinism, 'socialism' (of the Labour and Social Democratic type) and all the other products of the defeat of workers' struggles in the past. This is part of the preparation for the period of revolution: a revolution which will only succeed if the proletariat has been able to forge a party from its revolutionary minorities in advance of any complete breakdown of social peace.

Organisations like the CWO are the precursors of the international party of the working class. Such a party cannot be built overnight. It will be the result of thousands of struggles and debates, all of which are part of a process of the growing self-consciousness of the working class.

## **The Unity of the Working Class**

The bourgeoisie has a two-fold interest in using differences in the working class to divide it. In the first place, competition between workers can be used to push down wages and provide willing recruits for the bosses' wars, and, in the second, when workers are fighting each other they are not fighting the boss.

Although the absence of pre-existing differences has never stopped the bourgeoisie from trying to set workers at each others throats, it has always utilised any that have been available, such as sexual orientation and disability. Prejudice and bigotry against

such groups remain essential capitalist weapons to divide the working class. Workers find themselves divided mainly along lines of race, nationality and gender by the ideological and material discrimination of the bourgeoisie.

### **National Liberation and Nationalism**

In peace and in war, the bourgeoisie tries to get workers to identify with their 'own' country. For generations we have been told we will all lose our jobs if we don't work as hard as workers in other countries, precisely the same message that is given to workers everywhere.

In times of war we are told that we must fight our brothers and sisters in other countries as if they are any more responsible for the crimes of their bosses than we are for the crimes of ours! Workers' interests are not those of the capitalists, if we remain entwined within the coils of competition with workers in other countries only the bosses will profit, and at our expense.

What of those countries which are in capitalism's periphery? The internationalist communist left has never supported the so-called national struggles in capitalism's periphery. We are told that these struggles are against oppression and are anti-imperialist. It is true that in many nations there are oppressed minorities but these minorities can gain little by identifying with the capitalist leaders of their nation or group.

The agony of the Palestinian people is not suffered by their bourgeoisie, with their apartments in New York, but by the proletariat of Gaza and the West Bank. Their real interests lie not in replacing their Israeli exploiters with Palestinian exploiters but in combining with workers everywhere to end all exploitation and with it all national oppression. This goes for all such tragic situations. To encourage the work-

ing class anywhere to take part in national movements is to encourage workers to die for capitalism.

In a deeper sense these struggles are not anti-imperialist. In the first place, to be effective militarily they must find an imperialist backer. The Vietnam War brought untold suffering to the Vietnamese but they could only wage it against the US by fighting with Russian imperialist support. Secondly, once the military struggle is over the newly 'liberated' state cannot stand aside from the network of imperialist relations making up the world economy. No state today can develop independently and, no matter how weak its economy, must submit to the exigencies of capitalist competition on the world market. Again, "independent" Vietnam had no choice but to turn to Western investors and bow to the demands of the IMF.

*"The proletariat is the negation of all nationality" (Marx)*

To those who argue that Marx supported certain independence movements or that Lenin supported a policy of granting self-determination, we reply that such mechanical 'Marxism' is not Marxism at all. Marx was writing at a time when he could see that capitalism was developing a working class, new technology, machinery and scientific thought. All the things necessary to make communism possible. As a result, Marx and Engels supported some nationalist movements where they thought it would get rid of feudal and other pre-capitalist social structures. This was the basis for a new area for capitalist development. In this ascendant period of capitalism it was possible for new independent capitalist nations to emerge and thus widen the basis for the creation of the working class, the future gravediggers of capitalism.

However since the opening of the present imperialist phase of domination of the planet no such independent capitalist formation is possible. It was Luxemburg, not Lenin, who grasped this reality better

*"In this era of unfettered imperialism, there can no longer be national wars ... Small nations, whose ruling classes are appendages of their class comrades in the larger nations are merely pawns in the imperialist game played by the major powers."*

(Rosa Luxemburg)

despite her erroneous analysis of the roots of imperialism. The further development of capitalism this century has only underlined the correctness of Luxemburg's position on the national question. Lenin had expected that the political struggle of the colonial nations would provoke a huge crisis of the system. In fact this did not happen because when de-colonisation took place it simply cut the military costs of imperialism. It did not alter the economic relationship. In many instances decolonisation itself was part of an inter-imperialist struggle since it was forced on the older imperialist powers by the USA after its emergence as the dominant imperialist power in 1945.

Indeed, in the epoch of imperialism we can say that no imperialist power is independent since all states are part of an imperialist hierarchy in which there are only degrees of domination. Those states at the edge of the system are in the weakest position. Here, the local bourgeoisie, will occasionally use 'anti-imperialist' (i.e. nationalist) rhetoric to disguise the fact that they have simply become an integral part of capitalism's global domination of the working class. The only sure path to liberation for the world's workers is through the international class war, not through support for some bourgeois national liberation gang. The aim of the proletariat is the abolition of all nation states and all frontiers.

## Racism

Racism is not unique to capitalism. However it has one over-riding function in the capitalist mode of production. It is used to divide the working class. Unlike the capitalists who are continuously competing against each other the world's working class has no material reason for such divisions. Under capitalism the working class has been a class of migrants, constantly uprooted to provide the labour force for the mode of production, it has no property rights in any country, and as such, is constantly opposed to

any national interests. As Marx said in *The Communist Manifesto*, "workers have no country".

Despite the growing internationalisation of capitalism the capitalist class remains the national class. It owns the property, the means of production, in every nation. And by virtue of this ownership of property they dominate the national state. To further its exploitation of labour the capitalist state uses nationalism and racism to divide the working class. This tends to prevent workers from fighting with all their collective strength against the capitalist state. Instead divisions of race, religion and nation have the workers fighting over the meagre crumbs from the enormous wealth that they collectively create for the capitalist class. It is the task of all communists to fight against racism. Without class unity and class solidarity the working class is nothing. It would be unable to overthrow a system which stands as a barrier to the satisfaction of the basic needs of every human being on the planet.

We therefore fight racism on the basis of class unity. We have no time for the patronising reformist schemes of so-called multi-culturalists (who, in practice, pander to reactionary religious and social practices). We don't fight alongside organisations that use the issue to get recruits, nor do we plead with the democratic state to reform its racist practices. This would be utopian since the democratic capitalist state orchestrates racism.

Nor do we join in anti-fascist campaigns. These are reactionary diversions to mobilise workers behind the democratic state. Nurtured by the Stalinists in the 1930's as part of their imperialist manoeuvres to defend Russian interests in World War Two, anti-fascism was used to mobilise workers behind their governments in imperialist war. By supporting one form of capitalist domination (democracy) against another (fascism) the anti-fascists stand as barriers

to the emancipation of all workers.

In the final analysis, though working class areas have to be defended against racist attack, the ultimate defeat of racism can only come about once the capitalist state has been overthrown. Under communism hierarchical relations based on race or nationality will be things of the past. There will be no 'official language' which could create an artificially dominant group.

### **Women's Oppression**

The oppression of women is not peculiar to capitalist society but modern capitalism has its own ways of expressing it. Under the guise of sexual liberation women's sexuality is more than ever treated as a commodity for profit: from the more or less socially accepted forms like advertising to the more obvious forms of pornography and prostitution. In Britain, after more than twenty years of the Equal Pay Act women workers are still paid on average a third less than men.

Moreover, as the economic crisis becomes more acute the relative position of female workers is getting worse, not better. Married women are the first to disappear from the unemployment figures while an increase in low-paid, insecure, part-time work is being hailed as "what many women are looking for".

This regressive situation for women in the workplace indicates a more fundamental fact. This is that the gains made by women in the period after the Second World War were ephemeral victories which owed more to the post-war economic 'boom' than the so-called women's movement (which arose as a response to the changing role of women rather than as a determinant of it). In a wider sense too the economic crisis is provoking a reversal of earlier trends: witness the ideological campaign for a "return to family values" which is by no means the

exclusive preserve of the capitalist Right. A not-so-subtle shift in the dominant ideology is underway as the bourgeoisie from all quarters seeks to reduce state welfare costs and find scapegoats for the rising crime and social breakdown which is an integral part of economic decline.

*"[the communist society] will make the relations between the sexes a purely private matter ... since it does away with private property and educates children on a communal basis, and in this way removes the two bases of marriage up to now - the dependence of the wife on the husband and of the children on their parents ..." (Engels)*

Thus, although capitalism has laid the basis for women's liberation, by allowing women access to the world of social labour and to civil life in general, their oppression cannot be overcome within capitalist relations. This is not only because advances made by women are so easily eroded during the down-turn in the accumulation cycle but because in the last analysis the root of women's oppression lies in the family, that last bastion of bourgeois property relations. Divorce may be easier to come by and judges may modify some of the more glaring aspects of the bourgeois family (for example by admitting the possibility of rape within marriage); couples may live in free union, only to have this translated by bourgeois law into 'common law marriage'; 25% of children may be born 'out of wedlock' but single parents and their offspring are still dubbed a 'family'. The bourgeois legal system ensures that the more things change the more they stay the same.

Even though the evolution of capitalism itself has weakened the family as the basic unit of socialisation it is unable to advance beyond it. To do so would mean the creation of a communal society where not only would women no longer be the property of their husbands but where children would also no longer be the property of their parents but the responsibility of the community as a whole (and by this we do not mean the State). In a very real sense the liberation of women is indissolubly linked to the creation of a communist society and the liberation of the working class as a whole.

None of this means that discrimination against

women by bosses or Neanderthal attitudes by workers can be accepted as marginal issues to be resolved 'after the revolution'. Class unity demands that women play a full part in the class struggle. This is not just an issue for female members of the working class but for all workers. A class movement cannot be built round assumptions that the working class is essentially male (when about half of today's workforce is female), that there are men's jobs (full-time, better paid and worth fighting for) and women's jobs (low-paid, insecure, not worth fighting for). Strikes for equal pay for women used as cheap labour, for example, are just as much part of the class movement as any other battle of workers to defend themselves.

This has nothing to do with feminism. By ignoring class divisions and posing the question in terms of the attitude of men in general towards women in general, feminism hides the antagonism of interests between bourgeois and proletarian women. So-called progressive steps like the opening up of company boardrooms to female directors are no step forward for women workers. Similarly, recourse to lawyers and equal pay legislation is meaningless for the vast majority of women workers whose jobs are not covered by these laws.

As for the revolutionary organisation itself, it must take all necessary steps to ensure the fullest participation of as many women as possible in the communist movement. This does not mean that we advocate the separate organisation of women within the communist party, much less that female members are marginalised to deal exclusively with supposedly 'women's issues' such as health and child care. What it does mean is that women who genuinely want to see a revolutionary change of society, find in the communist organisation the best way to work for that goal.

## **False Friends**

The working class' worst enemies are those who pretend to be its friends. They prevent a fight against capitalism itself by leading workers up blind alleys. Instead of fighting for its own interests, the working class often ends up fighting for a faction of capital.

### **Trades Unions**

The trades unions have never been revolutionary. They began life as workers in specific trades came together to fight for better conditions. Initially banned and attacked by the full force of the capitalist state the unions gradually won legal recognition through the sacrifices and solidarity of the working class. Under imperialism they have tended to become part of the capitalist state's planning apparatus. They are fitted for this role because their function is to sell workers' labour power through negotiation with the bosses. This only makes sense within the framework of the national capitalist economy and so they defend this economy.

In World War One the unions, like their Social Democratic political masters, actively supported the imperialists in every country. They proclaimed 'social peace' and co-operated in implementing no-strike agreements. They also accepted the militarisation of labour, dilution, speed-ups, the extension of the working day and wage cuts.

Since 1914 it has not just been in periods of imperialist war or in open revolutionary struggle that unions have proved their value to capitalism. Starting from their position as the supposed representatives of the working class they are able to sell 'restructuring' (i.e. layoffs), 'realistic' pay deals (usually involving pay cuts), so-called 'flexible working' (no job security), and so on, in the interests of 'economic realism'. It has always been the unions (and their shopfloor policemen, the stewards) who scream loudest for protectionism and import controls 'to save jobs'. Such appeals are just the logical peace-

time policy for those who support the nationalist idea behind imperialist wars.

Confronted by workers in struggle the unions have their own agenda and attempt to control the struggle. By splitting up strikes section by section or industry by industry; by defusing and confusing the struggle through hour long 'stoppages' or 'days of action'; by using ballots as excuses for cooling down periods; by looking after their funds rather than acting outside the law to defend their members; by preventing mass meetings; and by isolating struggles and condemning solidarity action the union apparatus tries to ensure that the working class doesn't put up a serious challenge to the bosses' attacks.

*"...Trades Unions ... fail generally from limiting themselves to a guerrilla war against the effects of the existing system, instead of trying simultaneously trying to change it ... that is to say, the abolition of the wages system."*  
*(Wages, Prices and Profit, Marx 1865)*

Those who argue that all we need to do is change the trades union leadership in order to change the unions don't understand that it is the function of the unions today rather than their leadership which determines their reactionary policies. They should ask themselves why even the most militant or honest shop-floor union member begins to be transformed as they rise up the union apparatus. Today the unions exist more for the defence of the bureaucracy than for the defence of the workers who pay for funds which are rarely used to support strikers.

To those who urge the formation of new, 'breakaway', 'red', or even 'revolutionary' trades unions, we would point out that it is impossible and utopian. Permanent organisations of workers have to enter into negotiations with the capitalists and daily accept the continued existence of the system of exploitation. They would, at best, simply re-run the history of the last two centuries. We are no longer interested in the capitalist slogan of a "fair day's wage for a fair day's work", our slogan is the one Marx gave us nearly 130 years ago: "Abolition of the wages system".

To wage a struggle for its long-term interests the working class has to go beyond the trades union framework. Strikes, not unions, are today's "schools of socialism". But only if they unite workers from different sectors, only if they are run by elected and recallable delegates on strike committees responsible to mass meetings of workers. In this context the CWO supports the demands of all workers who struggle against capitalist attacks. However, we don't turn these demands into a fixed 'minimum', 'reformist' or 'transitional' programme. These are mere tricks to disguise the present weakness of working class consciousness.

The task of revolutionaries in the present period is to concretely pose an alternative direction for the whole working class. This may mean fighting for a militant line anywhere (including union meetings) where the working class is collectively found. This will mean fighting for election to strike committees when struggles are going forward but no revolutionary can accept any permanent post in capitalist organisations and that includes the unions.

Communists take an active part in any struggles which have the potential to go beyond the limitations of merely economic battles. Wherever possible, once a struggle dies down, we must regroup the more militant and potentially revolutionary workers in political groups connected to the revolutionary programme. In this way we can keep alive the sparks of consciousness in different workplaces for the next wave of struggle. This is not a recipe for reformism but, on the contrary, points forward to the explicit struggle for political power.

### **The 'Labour Movement'**

The British Labour Party has never been socialist. It was created at the beginning of this century to give the trades unions a voice in Parliament. The Labour Party affiliated to the Second International (now

simply called the Socialist International), where it remains today. This reflected the reformist practice it had in common with continental Social Democratic parties. These parties had a ‘minimum programme’ of reforms, and, unlike the Labour Party, a formal commitment to a ‘maximum programme’ of revolution, but, in their practice, the minimum programme completely obscured the maximum. A practice of seeking reforms within a nation state leads to identification with that state where the role of the working class is reduced to putting pressure on their ‘own’ state.

Like all of the parties who stayed in the Second International the Labour Party did not oppose imperialist war in 1914. Its unions pronounced a national truce and implemented no-strike deals in support of the war. Ever since the organisations of this International have proved faithful tools of the capitalist class. Despite the fact that many workers still hold illusions about them, they are in no sense any longer representatives of working class interests or politics. In Germany, the real class nature of social democracy was further demonstrated when they shot down revolutionary workers in their thousands to preserve the capitalist Weimar Republic in 1919-23. The British Labour Party and unions were content with saving parliamentary rule by calling off the General Strike in 1926.

It is no accident that post-war Labour governments have broken strikes by using troops on twelve more occasions than the Tories. As the left wing of capital they have a vital role in running the state at times of high class struggle (e.g. 1974) by posing as a workers’ party. In times of class peace they give the illusion that the workers have a choice at election time. They are the last-ditch defence of capitalism and cannot be won over to the working class camp.

### **Stalinism, Trotskyism, Maoism**

The Russian Revolution had long been defeated before Stalin became the undisputed leader of the USSR in 1928. This was the year when he adopted Trotsky's 1923 policy of a massive increase in exploitation of the proletariat (so-called primitive socialist accumulation).

Stalinism was not the logical outcome of the Bolshevik Revolution but a total break with its hopes and aspirations. Instead of freedom for the working class, Stalin (or rather the reconstituting capitalist class whose agent he was) developed a Party dictatorship of unprecedented ferocity. Instead of communism he developed the most viciously exploitative form of state capitalism and instead of international revolution he gave us the nonsense of 'socialism in one country'. All this was passed off by Western capitalist and Soviet state capitalists as 'communism'. It still represents one of the greatest ideological victories of capitalism to this day.

Trotsky's struggle against the degeneration of the Russian Revolution was always hamstrung by the fact that he himself saw state capitalism as socialism and he saw the Communist Party as the only arena for revolutionary politics. Trotsky also accepted the first four congresses of the Comintern as revolutionary, thus fatally accepting the idea of Social Democracy as a workers' current with which it was possible to do deals (the so-called "united front").

After he was exiled from the 'Soviet' Union, the reactionary consequences of this became apparent when in 1935 he urged his followers to enter the social democratic parties. This was the origins of the entryism which is currently carried out by currents such as Workers' Power and Socialist Organiser and was previously implemented by the precursors of all the British Trotskyist groups (SWP, Militant Labour and all the groups which emerged from the

old Workers' Revolutionary Party).

*"It is an error to maintain that in every situation expedients and manoeuvres can widen the base of the Party since relations between the party and the masses depend in large part on the objective situation."* (*Platform of the Italian Left, 1925*)

Trotsky and his followers also picked up and developed the confusions of the early Comintern on anti-imperialism and national self-determination. The sum of these anti-revolutionary positions resulted in the Trotskyists taking sides in the various localised imperialist conflicts (the Spanish Civil War, Italy's invasion of Abyssinia, China and Japan) leading up to the Second World War.

The counter-revolutionary nature of these policies was codified and compounded in the Transitional Programme<sup>4</sup> of 1938. Basically, this was a return to the idea of the minimum programme of social democracy before 1914. It means that the Trotskyists believe that a series of reformist demands can somehow generate a revolutionary consciousness. It is, in short, a policy which relies on manipulation and assumes that the working class will never attain communist consciousness through its own struggles.

Trotskyism today is simply another state capitalist current which has to be systematically attacked by all who consider themselves internationalist revolutionaries. Although the Trotskyist, Stalinist and Maoist currents have their differences, they are all part of what we call the state capitalist left. Despite their differences, all the bourgeois left support united fronts with the bourgeoisie, national liberation struggles against the proletariat and formerly most maintained that the USSR was a socialist or workers' state (however 'deformed'). All these elements make these currents the class enemy of the revolutionary proletariat.

## Tasks of Revolutionaries

Today the task facing workers' organisations is greater than ever. The domination of bourgeois ideology means that there is a marked separation between

the working class as a whole and its revolutionary minorities. The working class is more fragmented and disorientated than at any time in its history. At the same time we are facing a monstrous international enemy with the greatest accumulation of wealth and power in history. Today's international finance capitalists have also learned from the past. They know every trick to divide the working class in order to preserve their rotting system. But they cannot solve the objective contradictions of capitalism. The increasing barbarism of capitalism in the era of imperialism is the material basis for its eventual overthrow by a working class conscious of the need for a better system.

*"It is the task of the proletarian political organisation to return to the working class the lessons of its own historical experience so that they become a material force in the emancipation of our class."*

*(IBRP Platform)*

The basic task of revolutionaries before the revolution is to work inside the daily struggle of the working class to fight for the possibility of that better system along the lines of the communist programme. As workers become aware of their collective strength, they will learn to rely on themselves in their struggles, rather than upon others. Revolutionaries must be part of those struggles, arguing that the way to success is only by workers organising in mass meetings to extend the struggle as far as possible.

Wherever they can revolutionaries must also take practical initiatives in doing this. But, as we have already stated, victories in the economic struggle can only be temporary. The emancipation of the working class requires a political struggle for power. Communists have to mercilessly criticise and expose the capitalist organisations which seek to divert the class struggle onto safe ground for capitalism.

## **The Revolution**

The working class cannot win political power by electing a majority in parliament. In the first place it is an illusion of "parliamentary idiotism" (Marx) to believe that the ruling class would peacefully allow socialism to be legislated in. Further, Parliament is

merely a fig-leaf which hides the bourgeois dictatorship over society. The real organs of power in democratic capitalist societies lie outside Parliament with the state bureaucracy, its security forces and the controllers of the means of production. Parliament is no longer even "the executive committee of the ruling class". It is more useful to the bourgeoisie as a means of giving the illusion that elections provide a choice in capitalist society. In the polling booth, cut off from the awareness of their collective interests workers can choose which capitalist faction they wish to submit to.

*"Without revolution, socialism cannot develop." (Marx)*

The experiences of the Paris Commune in 1871 and the Russian Revolutions at the beginning of this century show that the workers cannot lay hold of the ready-made state machinery. They must first smash it and erect their own semi-state to suppress all the social conditions which give rise to class rule. The historically discovered forms of this 'dictatorship of the proletariat' are the workers' councils (soviets). These consist of mandated delegates who, unlike capitalist MPs, do not misrepresent a constituency for five years without fear of being replaced. All delegates are subject to instant recall and substitution by the workers who elect them. But the forms of the dictatorship of the proletariat are not enough to allow proletarian rule to survive. Political clarity and the international spreading of the revolution are the fundamentals of victory.

If the working class is unsure of the need to suppress the enemy class and allows that class to maintain a state structure, then a political battle must be waged by revolutionaries inside, and, if necessary, outside the soviets for the total smashing of the capitalists and their political organisation. If the working class continues to hold illusions about self-management on a local scale, with each workplace continuing to produce commodities for exchange, communists must point out that this also implies competition, the

re-emergence of inequalities between workplaces, the resulting subordination of workers in the weaker production units to those in the stronger, the continuation of production for profit not need, and the persistence of classes.

The revolution must spread worldwide. Wherever the capitalists remain in power, they will seek to destroy the achievements of the working class. More decisively, without global communism the institution of full production for need would not be possible. A liberated area would be dependent on resources from outside. These could take the form of commodities which, even if the capitalists were willing to supply them, would have to be paid for and would be subject to the uncontrolled whims of capitalist markets. This would obstruct the planning of production by the producers for the satisfaction of human need.

## **The Transitional Society**

The worldwide abolition of capitalism cannot come about overnight but as soon as the working class takes power in any one area a transitional society between capitalism and communism begins. To the extent that it is possible and consistent with the survival of proletarian political power, production for exchange can be abolished. Instead the producers themselves will plan production on the basis of society's needs.

*"Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation ... in which the state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat." (Marx)*

Non-proletarian strata, including the capitalists, will cease to be property owners. As such they will be integrated into the collective productive process and thereafter into social decision making. To the extent that this is done, the need for the suppression of the old class enemy disappears and soviet society loses its class character, the state will wither away.

When full production for need has been instituted on a global basis, the era of truly human history will open, the era of "from each according to their ability,

to each according to their need".

### Communist Workers' Organisation, 1994

#### Notes

- 1 The world's major economic powers, which, for historical reasons, dominate the world market.
- 2 i.e., economically marginal to the global accumulation of capital. This is not a geographical concept.
- 3 The first being before the First World War, the second between the two world imperialist wars.
- 4 The *Transitional Programme* was the key founding document of the Trotskyist Fourth International. All the current Trotskyist organisations are political descendants of the 1938 founding conference.