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# Imperialism and the Tasks of the Proletariat

Anton Pannekoek

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quence of a small struggle planned by the Party that overflows its limits; in another, as an event that breaks out against the will and decisions of the organisations, breaching all discipline but then carrying these organisations along in their powerful swell and forcing them for a time to go along with the revolutionary elements. The possibility cannot be excluded that, if the War continues for some time, something of that sort could soon take place. The symptoms are already discernible.

In the coming period, therefore, the existing organisations (the Party and trade-unions), by virtue of their whole nature and in contradiction with the goals and tasks of the proletarian masses, will probably play above all an inhibiting role. But, if the new tactic is ever more prevalent, and if the power of the proletariat gradually increases in great mass-struggles, these organisations will no longer be able to play that role. Then the rigid, immovable bodies of the Party and the trade-unions will become an increasingly subordinate part within a broader class-movement and a larger class-organisation, which will bind together the masses — not through its membership-book but through the community of class-goals — into a powerful community of struggle.

## Introduction

In his 1912 debate with Kautsky over parliamentarism vs. mass-action, Pannekoek postulated a dialectical relationship between imperialism and mass-actions as a counterpoise to the purely electoral and parliamentary tactics of the SPD-Centre:

We do not have to deal here with the causes and driving forces of imperialism; let us just enumerate its manifestations and effects: world-power politics, the armaments-race (especially warship-building), colonial conquests, growing tax-oppression, war-danger, growing spirit of violence and domination among the bourgeoisie, reaction in domestic politics, discontinuation of social reform, growth of employers' associations, aggravation of trade-union struggles, high cost of living. All this places the working class in a new fighting position. Earlier it could hope to progress slowly but surely, improving working conditions through the trade-union struggle, advancing social reforms and increasing its political rights through its political representation. Today it has to strain all its forces not to be deprived of its current rights and living standard. *Its attack has been turned into a defence.*

The class-struggle thus becomes sharper and more generalised; its driving force, more and more, is not the allure of a better situation, but the bitter need of the workers to defend their rights from deterioration. Imperialism threatens the masses with new dangers and catastrophes (the petty bourgeoisie as much as the proletariat) and whips them up into resistance; taxes, high cost of living, and the war-danger make a bitter resistance necessary. But these phenomena

originate only partially in legislation and can therefore only partially be fought against in parliament. The masses themselves must enter the political arena and exert a direct pressure on the ruling classes. This necessity is joined by the growing ability of the proletariat to assert its power. An ever-growing contradiction develops between the impotence of parliament, including our Reichstag-fraction, to fight against these phenomena and the working class's growing consciousness of its power. Mass-actions are therefore the natural consequence of the imperialist development of modern capitalism and increasingly constitute the necessary form of struggle against it.<sup>1</sup>

Karl Kautsky replied that the goal of the socialist movement was 'the conquest of state-power by winning a majority in parliament and by making parliament the controller of the government.'<sup>2</sup> In 'Imperialism and the Tasks of the Proletariat,' Pannekoek rejected long-established traditions of Social-Democratic parliamentarism to emphasise, instead, the priority of revolutionary, mass-struggle. We have chosen to conclude this volume with Pannekoek's article because it effectively summarises the history we have been documenting and the reasons for the final submission of Europe's Social-Democratic parties to the nationalism and imperialist war-hysteria of 1914–18.

We also regard this article as significant in another respect; namely, its anticipation of the issues ultimately posed by Lenin's concept of the 'vanguard-party.' Though the present article was published in a journal issued jointly by the Bolsheviks and the Dutch Tribunist, Pannekoek's emphasis on mass-actions, as against the bureaucratic organisations of class-parties and

<sup>1</sup> Pannekoek 1912a, pp. 541–2, in Grunenber (ed.), pp. 264–5.

<sup>2</sup> Kautsky 1912e, p. 732. For the continuation of the debate see Pannekoek 1912b and 1913b, Kautsky 1913 and Pannekoek 1913c.

gle against imperialism resolutely and with all their might. Their struggle will be a verbal struggle, with indictments, pleas and entreaties, a *sham-struggle* avoiding every *actual fight*. The best proof of this is provided precisely by Kautsky, who, after long wavering, took up the fight against social-imperialism only simultaneously to call the workers' street demonstrations an 'adventure.' Therefore imperialism must be fought with words alone, not by daring to undertake any action!

Therefore, nothing more must be expected from the previous party-bureaucracy other than further rejection of the revolutionary struggle against imperialism. It will attempt to limit the struggle to small quarrels in parliament and the press, to long speeches on small issues, to petty union-battles. Although the reformists are partisans of imperialism and the centrist radicals its opponents, they can remain together on a common line of mere criticism and inaction. They will attempt to turn the party into a bourgeois reform party, into a Labour Party on the English pattern but with some socialist phrases; a party that will vigorously champion the daily interests of the workers but wage no great revolutionary struggle.

The task of showing the workers the importance and necessity of mass-actions against imperialism, and of standing at their head on every occasion, enlightening, helping and leading them, devolves upon the revolutionary socialists. But if this new tactic is only propagated by minorities or small groups that do not yet have the masses behind them, while, at the same time, the great mass-parties want to know nothing about it — will not any mass-action, which is inconceivable without the masses, be a utopia? This contradiction only proves that mass-actions are not possible as conscious, deliberately planned actions, prepared and led by the Social-Democratic Party, as the extreme Left in Germany advocated in its propaganda in the years before the War. They will come as spontaneous actions, erupting from masses who are whipped up by hardship, misery and outrage: in one case, as the unintended conse-

numbering several thousand individuals who already constitute a distinct caste, a group with their own interests who thereby totally dominate the organisation spiritually and materially. It is no coincidence that they all, with Kautsky at their head, want to know nothing about a real and fierce *struggle* against imperialism. All their vital interests are opposed to the new tactic, which threatens their existence as officials. Their peaceful work in offices and editorial departments, in congresses and committee meetings, in writing learned and unlearned articles against the bourgeoisie and against each other — this whole peaceful hustle and bustle is threatened by the storms of the imperialist era. Kautsky's theory and tactics are an attempt to secure this whole bureaucratic-learned apparatus against injury in the coming social revolutions. Actually, it can only be saved by setting it apart from the din of battle, beyond the revolutionary struggle, and thus outside of real life. If the Party and its leadership followed the tactics of mass-action, the state would immediately attack and perhaps destroy the organisations (the foundation of their entire existence and life activity), confiscate their funds and arrest their leaders. Naturally, it would be an illusion if they believed that the power of the proletariat would also be broken that way: the organisational power of the workers does not consist in the outer form of institutional bodies but in their spirit of cohesion, discipline and unity, which would enable them to create new and better forms of organisation. But that would be the end for the officials, because that organisational form is their entire world, and without it they can neither exist nor function. Accordingly, their instinct for self-preservation and their future corporate interests necessarily compel them to [adopt] the tactic of evading [the issue of] imperialism and capitulating before it. What took place before the War and at the outbreak of the War is therefore not an abnormal accident. They say now — as they so often did in the past — that such dangerous mass-struggles will ruin the organisation and therefore must not be undertaken wantonly. It follows that organisations led by them will never wage the strug-

trade-unions, clearly foreshadows the future break between Leninism and council-communism.<sup>3</sup> Pannekoek saw the enemy of socialism in the rule of officials, whether they be officials of a parliamentary party or the Secretariat of a tightly centralised vanguard-party. In that sense, his 'Imperialism and the Tasks of the Proletariat' provides equal insight into the fatal afflictions of both the Second International and its successor, the Third (Communist) International.

## Imperialism and the Tasks of the Proletariat

### I

The outbreak of the first major world war in 1914 luridly illuminated two facts: first, the *enormous force of imperialism*, and second, the *weakness of the proletariat*, especially its vanguard and leadership in the struggle, the Social-Democratic parties of almost all countries.

Imperialism differs from the old capitalism in its striving to bring foreign parts of the world under its domination in order to create new markets for its products, to find new sources of raw materials and, above all, new investment areas for the overflowing masses of capital. The masses of capital increased enormously during the prosperous period of the last twenty years, and the urge to invest them in undeveloped countries with high profits therefore became dominant among the bourgeoisie. As a result, the various bourgeoisies confronted each other as competitors. The young German bourgeoisie, whose rise is recent, looked everywhere for new territories (colonies or spheres of influence), but saw its way obstructed by the old world-ruling states, particularly England, as in Morocco in 1911, while the German bourgeoisie itself prevented

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<sup>3</sup> On council-communism, see van der Linden 2004. On Pannekoek's further political evolution see Gerber 1989, Smart 1978, Bricanier 1978, Pannekoek 1970.

Russia's penetration into Asia Minor. All of them armed in order to have a decisive say in the battle for distribution of the world; all strove for as much *world power as possible*. This quest gradually seized the entire bourgeoisie everywhere. The anti-militarist, progressive or radical opposition among the ranks of the bourgeoisie gradually gave in, yielding to the growing military demands or being abandoned by its old following. In England, as in France and Germany, the old bourgeois opposition to the imperialist course increasingly melted down to a few phrases as votes were cast for the fleet, the army and colonial outlays. In Germany, the growth of this tendency among the bourgeoisie was most clearly visible because *German imperialism* naturally had to be *aggressive*; it still had everything to gain and felt strong enough for the purpose. In other countries, where imperialism had primarily to defend its possessions, that process was less evident; in those places the growth of imperialist aspirations and resolve became fully apparent only during the war. But, during the past twenty years, imperialism has everywhere become the ruling policy of all the major capitalist states.

Only one force stood apart from imperialism and fought against it: Social Democracy, representing the proletariat. Its resolutions at numerous national and international conferences expressed antipathy towards this policy. The sincerity of these statements cannot be doubted, because the danger drew steadily closer that a war would flare out of these imperialist ambitions, and, for the workers, such a world war meant the greatest disasters — countless victims and material sacrifices, collapse of their international union, and economic decline over long decades. The international congresses, therefore, made the fight against war the main duty of the Social-Democratic parties. Sometimes people even boasted that governments' fear of Social Democracy would prevent a war. But, when the governments really wanted war in 1914, *the resistance of Social Democracy* in the West-European countries *turned out to be an insubstantial shadow*. Social Democracy never acknowledged its

greatest enemy of the working class, merely made it clear that *reformists and revolutionaries*, who, during the period of small reforms, could remain together in the same organisation, no longer belong together but must be *mortal* enemies. But the case is different with the bulk of the German party leaders and its leading circles — whose literary agent is *Kautsky*. They are not friends of imperialism but enemies: they did not go along with the War out of imperialist convictions or clear national consciousness, but partly because they were duped by the watchword of defence, partly because they retained the old ideology of defence of the fatherland, and also out of ignorance and Philistinism, because they did not know how to fight and did not dare to fight against the ruling class. In their case, therefore, we have the prospect of a swing in their mood that is already significantly noticeable; and the same is true of the best part of the French workers, both among those who previously supported Social Democracy and among those who were with the syndicalists. It is conceivable that these masses and their representatives will come out against the bourgeoisie and the war in an increasingly energetic way. Does this not imply hope that the majority, the largest or at least a very large part of the former Social Democracy, will brace itself for a vigorous struggle against imperialism and, disabused by hard experience, will be able to defend itself and apply the new tactical methods, thus building the new International out of the ashes of the old one?

This question is of paramount importance and cannot be predicted here with any certainty. But some important reasons can be cited for making *another* future likely. They lie in the whole nature of a large, fully developed party, of which German Social Democracy is the model. It is an entrenched gigantic organisation, functioning almost as a state within the state, with its own officers, finances, press, intellectual world and ideology (Marxism). The general character of this organisation is adapted to the peaceful pre-imperialist period; the mainstays of this character are the officials, secretaries, agitators, parliamentarians, theorists and writers,



class to launch this struggle by means of mass-actions and to strike out on the path of freedom.

A new chapter is beginning in the proletarian liberation-struggle. For the first time, this struggle is now rising to the level of its great objectives: the entire force of the proletariat must be used against the enormous power of a massively developed capitalism and an energetic and combative bourgeoisie. In their many millions, the masses themselves must step onto the scene — whipped by hardship and suffering into energetic actions, their hearts full of enthusiasm, their souls full of revolutionary energy — with their glance no longer fixed on the narrow arena of the workplace and small improvements but on the great world struggle of classes. A new International will arise: not one that simply abounds with fraternal feelings towards class-comrades across the border and then immediately collapses before the national frenzy of the rulers, but one [in which the proletariat] will be ready to fight together with proletarians of other nationalities against its own war-mongering bourgeoisie.

At present we find ourselves amidst the ruins of the old International and the old socialism; we only see from afar, only theoretically as it were, how things must and will turn out. *Can we already notice perhaps, in what is happening today, the beginnings of the new development?* Do we already see the new labour-movement, the new International arising from the old?

It has often been said that, after the War, a *split in the socialist parties must take place*. Those who have gathered on the side of imperialism, who have wholeheartedly made common 'national' cause with the bourgeoisie — people like Scheidemann, Heine, Lensch, Vaillant, Sembat, Plekhanov, the liquidators, Tillett — all of them, whatever their previous services to the labour-movement, will no longer be able to remain with the firm fighters against imperialism. But things are not that simple. Certainly, reformism has long wanted to go along with the bourgeoisie, with its colonial policy and imperialism; the War, which has exposed imperialism as the

impotence while *gnashing its teeth*. Rather, it went along with the War, submitted to the will of the bourgeoisie, became patriotic and approved the war-loans — a complete break with everything it had proclaimed until then to be its principles and tactics.

How was that possible? The answer repeatedly given is that Social Democracy, the proletariat, was *too weak*. This is true, but it can easily be misunderstood. Defenders of the German Party's attitude also said: We were too weak, so we could not resist and had to join in. But had the problem simply been lack of material force, one could have tried to fight and resist to the utmost, as in Italy for instance. It was far worse — *no attempt was made to fight*. The weakness was much more profound: a lack of ability to fight at all, a lack of mental strength, a lack of will to wage the class-struggle. Everyone knew in advance that the [German Social-Democratic] Party could not defeat and crush the bourgeoisie. In the last elections, it received only one-third of all votes, and, in a nation of seventy million, it only had only one million members (the vast majority of whom simply paid dues). But, according to these measures of its external strength, the Party was strong enough to unleash a large movement against the War and to become the core of a powerful opposition movement. The fact that no such attempt was made, and that people laid down their weapons without a struggle, proves that the Party *was rotten from the inside and incapable of fulfilling its new tasks*.

The Social-Democratic parties arose from earlier conditions of a preimperialist period; they are spiritually and materially adapted to the tasks of the proletarian struggle in an earlier period. Their task was to fight for reforms during the ascending phase of capitalism — to the extent that they were possible within the capitalist framework — and to rally and organise the proletarian masses for that purpose. Large organisations and parties were thus created, but, in the meantime, the fight for improvements increasingly degenerated into *striving for reforms at any price*, into begging and compromising with the bourgeoisie, into a limited policy for the

most immediate minor benefits, no longer paying any attention to the great interests of the entire class and even giving up the class-struggle itself. Under the influence of immense prosperity, which strictly limited the worst misery of unemployment, a spirit of contentment, of indifference towards general class interests, made itself manifest among a section of the proletariat. *Reformism* increasingly dominated Social Democracy and revealed the degeneration and decay of the old methods at precisely the time when the proletariat faced new tasks.

The fight against imperialism embodied these new tasks. One could no longer manage against imperialism with the old means. In parliament, one could criticise its manifestations (such as armaments, taxes, reaction, the standstill of social legislation), but one could not influence its policy because it was not made by the parliaments but by small groups of people (in Germany, the Kaiser along with some nobles, generals, ministers and bankers; in England, three or four aristocrats and politicians; in France, a few bankers and ministers). The unions could hardly ward off the powerful business associations; all the skill of their officers broke apart against the granite-power of the cartel-magnates. The reactionary election laws could not be shaken through elections alone. New means of struggle were necessary. *The proletarian masses themselves had to enter the stage with active methods of struggle.*

It was conceivable that the Party would be able to adapt to these new conditions and tasks in advance and change its tactics accordingly. In order to do so, it was first of all necessary to have a clear conception, an intellectual grasp of imperialism, of its causes, strength and significance. Second, the masses themselves had to be involved in the fight where the power of parliaments was not enough. A small beginning was made in the struggle for the general suffrage in Prussia; the masses took to the streets so vigorously that the party leadership itself recoiled at the scale of the new struggles, which, all at once, seemed to prefigure the immediate future — and thereafter it began to stifle them. A small group of *left radicals*

the prevention of mutual understanding, the authorities seek to discourage, intimidate and divide the workers. Whether these measures will succeed depends then on the firm and clear knowledge, the unbreakable unity and discipline of the masses. If they do succeed, that means a defeat for the workers, who afterwards must try to do the same thing again with new force. But, if they fail, then the government has more or less to give in and the proletariat achieves a victory; its power grows once again, and the power of the state receives a blow. In a mass-strike, the entire organisation of the state can temporarily be thrown out of joint and its functions can devolve upon the organs of the proletariat. In the future, what happened in 1905 in Russia will happen in Western Europe on a much vaster scale. The organisation of the proletariat then showed — at least temporarily — its superiority over the organisation of the bourgeoisie. If the army is used against the masses, that can temporarily lead to a victory for the government; but, therewith, discipline begins to loosen at the same time, and, ultimately, the strongest means of power of the ruling class escapes from its hands. Of course, some of the achievements thus won can be lost again; victories and defeats will alternate, but, in the long run, the insight, organisational power and revolutionary energy of the masses will continually increase while the power of the state will decrease. If the proletariat, and together with it society as such, are not to perish, then only one outcome of the struggle is possible: *the strength of proletarian solidarity and organisation, growing in battle, smashes the power and organisation of the state through mass-actions.* Political power therewith falls into the hands of the proletariat, who can then go on to create the institutions necessary for a new regulation of production.

The historic significance of mass-actions is that, through the hard struggles of the class itself, they will make the proletariat mature for socialism and enable the destruction of bourgeois rule. This is the historic significance of imperialism: it will force the working

finally surpass that of the ruling class. Through its classconsciousness and socialist understanding, the working class will become intellectually independent of the bourgeoisie and eventually intellectually stronger; through its organisation, it will be able finally to withstand the powerful organisations of the bourgeoisie and become more solid than its state-power. And this growth in the elements of the proletariat's power also means transformation of the whole of humanity from a limited, undiscerning mass of isolated and selfish individuals into an organised mankind, guided by a common awareness of their social nature, who will thus become capable, for the first time, of exercising control by themselves and of consciously shaping their production and social life. That same growth in power will enable the proletariat to overthrow the rule of the bourgeoisie as it simultaneously makes the proletariat mature for socialism.

What is it that brings about this growth? The class-struggle. All struggles, regardless of whether they immediately end in victory or defeat, contribute to developing the proletariat's power by clarifying its understanding, strengthening its organisation or doing away with inhibiting traditions. In the previous period, the significance of parliamentarism lay in the fact that it established the first beginnings of proletarian power, brought socialist consciousness to the masses, helped to create organisations, stirred the masses somewhat and, at the same time, undermined the moral prestige of the state. That was not enough to conquer political power, but it did make mass-actions possible. *Mass-actions will be the means to increase the power of the proletariat further, to its highest level, and at the same time to crush the power of the state.*

In mass-actions, the mightiest of which is the mass-strike, the strongest instruments of power of the two classes confront each other. Through its moral and spiritual force, its organisation and its violence, the state seeks to prevent or break the action of the masses in order to avoid having to yield to it. Through press-censorship, false reports, a state of siege, arrests, rifle-volleys, and

tried to push the Party further along this path of mass-struggles, and a few sought to awaken some understanding of imperialism. But the leading strata of the Party — the leadership, the *party bureaucracy*, Kautsky and his friends — stood in the way of that pursuit. For them, imperialism was just a bourgeois madness about the arms-race, nurtured by a few great capitalists, from which one had to dissuade the bourgeoisie by means of good arguments. They searched for their salvation in the slogan 'back to the old tried and tested tactic,' with which they opposed the new revolutionary tactic and sought in vain to drive back revisionism. The *bureaucracy of officials and leaders*, who naturally identified their own *group-interests* in peaceful and undisturbed party development with the interests of the proletariat, used all their strength to oppose the 'anarcho-syndicalist adventures' into which the 'mass-action fanatics' wanted to plunge the Party. Through its press, offices and prestige, the party bureaucracy dominated the Party mentally and physically. Thus, the traditional *party structure*, handed down from previous conditions, *was unable to face the new tasks and reshape itself accordingly*. It had to perish. The outbreak of war was the catastrophe. Taken by surprise, stunned and confused by events, unable to resist, carried away by nationalist slogans, and without spiritual support, the proudest organisation of Social Democracy broke down as an organ of revolutionary socialism. And with it went almost all the Social-Democratic parties of Europe, most of them being long corroded inwardly by reformism. The question must be left to the future as to how, from these ruins and after a new power-struggle, the advent of socialism will take place. From the collapse of the old Social Democracy, we can only draw some lessons concerning the tasks awaiting the proletariat and how it will be able to fulfill them.

## II

The struggle of the proletariat against capitalism is presently possible only as a struggle against imperialism, since modern capitalism does not know any policy other than imperialist policy. Nowadays, the class-struggle, the struggle for socialism, assumes the form of the struggle against imperialism. But, as such, it takes on a new, and actually a more promising character. New prospects of victory appear; indeed, we can calmly assert that *only imperialism creates the conditions for a victory of the proletariat, for the attainment of socialism.*

First, imperialism makes the class-struggle more intensive and all-embracing. Imperialism awakens all the forces dormant in the bourgeois world; it gives to the bourgeoisie much energy and enthusiasm for the ideals of world power that carry away large masses. So long as the workers are trapped in the old traditions and do not yet rise to the height of the times, that admittedly means, at first, a collapse of the labour-movement. But the hope of socialism does not lie in the inability and lack of energy of the bourgeoisie, but, rather, in the ability and strength of the proletariat. Pressure creates counter-pressure; the pressure and energy from above finally awaken exasperation, determination to fight, and energy from below. In the old capitalism, the driving force of the struggle was the desire to improve conditions; yet millions lived on in inert satisfaction, and the striving for reforms was not sufficient to awaken the requisite energy. Today, imperialism brings down their living standards, burdens the masses with rising taxes, and demands from them ever greater sacrifices up to their complete destruction; today, the degradation of their lives arouses them and forces them to defend themselves. Today, the masses can no longer say: I do not care about it because I am satisfied. They are forcibly involved in the struggle because imperialism actively attacks the proletariat. And not just the proletariat, but the farmers and petty bourgeoisie as well; formerly, they did not

frage must first of all be obtained, and that is only possible through the extraparliamentary actions of the masses themselves. The constitutional conquest of political power by the proletariat consists of two elements: first, the majority of the people must be won over for socialism; and, second, the majority must have command over government and the state. The first requires propaganda, agitation and action, which are generally conceivable within the framework of the parliamentary system; the second implies absolute *political* democracy, which is nowhere available and cannot be realised by means of peaceful agitation and legislative work in parliament. *It can only be achieved by means of a mass-struggle, through mass-actions.* Thus, the centre of gravity in the struggle for political rule increasingly lies in the struggle *for* political rights, which constitute the expression of the popular majority's rule over the state. In this struggle, as in the class-struggle in general, the ruling class sets in motion against the proletariat the state authority with its instruments of power. State-power is not just a neutral object of the class-struggle, but a weapon and fortress of the bourgeoisie, its strongest prop, without which it could never hold its ground. The struggle of the proletariat is therefore first of all a struggle *against state-power.*

What is the significance of mass-actions in this struggle?

All political conditions and situations are determined by the balance of power between classes. Constitutional questions are questions of power. A rising class can seize power only when it becomes stronger than its opponents. The question of socialism is a question of growth in the power of the proletariat. The social power of the proletariat consists of its numerical superiority, which grows by itself due to capitalism; of its spiritual power — class consciousness, revolutionary thinking, clear comprehension of the nature of the state and society; and finally, of its material or moral force — organisation, solidarity, unity and discipline. Today, all these factors are still present only in insufficient measure, but, through their growth, the power of the working class will

to overcome the domination of capital and represents the only road to socialism.

The rule of the bourgeoisie, like that of all previous ruling classes, is based on the great instruments of power at its disposal. Although it is usually a minority, it disposes of knowledge and skills that make it intellectually superior to the mass of the ruled; through the school, the Church and the press, the class of the owners rules over the thought and feelings of the masses. In addition, its power lies in its strong organisation. A well-organised minority can dominate a majority if the latter is not organised, that is to say, if it possesses no cohesion, no unity of action and will. This organisation of the ruling class is the state-power; through its multi-branched army of public servants, it confronts the fragmented atoms of the people as a body with a unified will. And where the resulting customary authority disappears among the masses and they become rebellious, the state has strong material instruments of power at its disposal, such as the police, the judiciary, and, finally, a well-disciplined and well-equipped army. What can an unorganised mass of individuals do against all this?

During the period of parliamentarism, the illusion was often cherished that we fight against the bourgeoisie over state-power, to take command of the existing organism of the state that controls legislation. The consequence of this idea was the reformist conception that it was only necessary to replace capitalist by socialist ministers in order to enter into socialism with full sails. One might, on the contrary, question whether any substantial change takes place in the world if the persons of the ministers change. One can recall from experience that every Social Democrat who became a minister, at the same time became a servant and trustee of the ruling class. But the decisive thing for evaluating this parliamentary conquest of power is the fact that the ruling class can everywhere make a peaceful seizure of political power impossible in advance by means of the electoral law and the constitution. To make a parliamentary conquest of power possible at all, universal and equal suf-

suffer much from capital, but now they have to surrender their property and their lives for the imperialist goals of big business. Everyone is drawn into the fight on one side or the other, and no one can stand apart from it. And, because socialism cannot be won and built by a small core of fighters amid an unconcerned popular mass, but only by the *whole* nation, this generalisation of the struggle by imperialism creates for the first time the conditions for socialism.

Second, imperialism makes new tactical methods necessary. If *mass-actions* are often referred to as a *new* tactic, that is simply because the correct estimation of reality was lost in the age of parliamentarism, when the illusion arose that speeches by leaders were enough to bring a class to victory. Every major social upheaval, every transmission of power to a new class, has been the work of the masses, of the classes themselves that secured the victory. The parliamentary system was crucial during the preparation-period, when the class had first to be organised and the struggle could only be fought with words. Once sufficient forces were gathered to launch active attacks, the old truth came into its own that only the class itself can fight the battle. And that is all the more true when new conditions and new social hardships incite the masses to action. Just as the French Revolution was a result of the rise of the bourgeoisie and the penetration of new ideas, though its outbreak in precisely those years was simultaneously the effect of the greater distress of the masses and of increased political tension, so in the proletarian revolution the slow growth of socialist thought coincides with the stimulating effect of certain social events.

Both their distress and these events are created by imperialism, which in that way drives the masses to spontaneous action. Parliaments can usually do nothing when the policy of the ruling classes leads, so to speak, mechanically and instinctively to the worst harassment or hostilities against the masses, such as inflation, wage-cuts, taxes, unemployment, political reaction and war. In those circumstances, only the masses can do anything. If the masses

remain inactive, being confused and uncertain, all the protests in parliament cannot help, and they must helplessly submit to everything. But, if they wish to act, they must do it as masses, exerting direct pressure on the government through spontaneous or planned demonstrations and actions. This pressure appears as a new political factor because the interest of the ruling class is more or less to give in for fear of the further growth of such movements. It has repeatedly happened in recent years and in various countries that a planned attack on the right of assembly was prevented by a mass-action, for instance, a political strike. Had the German proletariat stepped into action vigorously and massively three years ago against the high cost of living, or a year ago against the War, the ruling classes would certainly have been forced to take it more or less into account.

Not only are mass-actions the only means of waging a successful struggle against those hardships and dangers, but important reforms are also impossible to achieve any other way. In the first period of parliamentarism, many reforms were won because the growth of Social-Democratic votes terrified the ruling classes; they felt the foundations of their rule shaking. But, when they realised that it was just a question of elections, of an oppositional attitude followed by no further action, their fear disappeared and with it their willingness to reform. The phrase '*Oderint, dum metuant*'<sup>4</sup> also applies in the class-struggle; red votes do not harm the bourgeoisie if they are not followed by action. The ruling class makes concessions only out of fear that, otherwise, the dissatisfaction, power and rebellion of the proletariat will grow too far. With imperialism, which inspired the bourgeoisie with new self-confidence and assurance, reforms therefore came to an end. Stronger means and mass-actions are now required in order to win reforms; and in Belgium, Sweden and Russia this method of action has already proved its force in the conquest of new political rights.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Let them hate so long as they fear.' (A favorite saying of Caligula.)

This means that the contrast between the revolutionary tactics of mass-actions and the non-revolutionary tactics of 'pure-and-simple' parliamentarism must not be understood in any absolute sense. Everything that increases the power of the working class is revolutionary. Thus, parliamentarism was revolutionary thirty years ago, while attempts to carry out subversive actions were fruitless and therefore non-revolutionary. In many cases, parliamentarism now has non-revolutionary effects because it does not strengthen the power of the proletariat but, rather, weakens it — and yet a well-conducted parliamentary fight can continue to have great revolutionary significance. Under imperialism, the unity of reform and revolution still remains the fundamental principle of socialist tactics; the struggle for the direct vital interests of the proletariat against everything that oppresses it is, at the same time, the struggle for socialism. Compared with the past, the difference lies in the fact that, *in the future, great and important reforms can only be achieved with the great means of mass-actions*. Mass-actions are the main and decisive manifestations of the proletariat's power, which it needs against the enormous power of imperialism in order not to be smashed, to hold its ground and to move forwards. Besides this, all the minor means of the daily struggles still retain all their value and necessity. That is why this new period of capitalism, which we call the age of imperialism, will at the same time be *the age of mass-actions*.

### III

We see, therefore, how the new character of modern capitalism makes a *new socialism*, a new labour-movement with a new character, necessary — in the sense that this is the only way in which a really successful fight against capitalism is possible. But this new struggle does not only follow as an inevitable necessity from the new capitalism; at the same time, it also constitutes the only way