

Review: Workers Councils (Pannekoek)

Iron Chef, Class Against Class (NEFAC-Boston)

2003

In what is widely considered the classic text on council communism, Anton Pannekoek offers a detailed account of how a council system could function in practice. Pannekoek was the main theoretician of the council movement, which for decades was all but forgotten. However, in recent years a new generation has begun to discover its relevancy.

Pannekoek's vision is probably best understood in the context of his experiences, which are barely touched upon in the text. Following his days as a social-democrat in Holland in the years leading up to WWI, he would go on to become a leading figure in the emergence of the European communist movement. However, Pannekoek would be among the first to break ranks with authoritarian communism and eventually be expelled from the German Communist Party. Critical of parliamentarism as a strategy, he would initiate the formation of the German left-Communist Workers Party (KAPD), a movement that rejected party rule, favored direct workers' representation, and took on aspects of anarcho-syndicalism.

Pannekoek, along with most Dutch and German radicals, critically supported the Russian Revolution of 1917. He worked closely with Lenin in an attempt to start a new revolutionary International and saw the Bolshevik Revolution as a mass movement largely based on council-style democracy. However, the course of the 'revolution' changed Pannekoek's opinion. By 1919, he was openly critical of the Lenin's enforcement of the dead-end strategies of parliamentarism and trade unions and the destruction of the soviets (councils). Pannekoek understood that Czarism was not overthrown by parliamentarism or trade unions, but rather the outbreak and evolution of workers' soviets and soldiers' councils.

Pannekoek came to reject the vanguard party model as counterproductive to a radicalization of the working class and, therefore decided it was an obstacle on the road to real socialism. By 1921, he concluded that Lenin's regime was a counter-revolutionary force and that the workers were now under worse conditions than before the revolution. His critique prompted Lenin to respond with "Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder.

The council movement rejected Bolshevik orders to accept Lenin's rule. Despite the fact that the German Communist Party dwarfed the movement, they remained active for years, upheld their own unions, and maintained an armed militia (the Ruhr). However, massive upheaval in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s all but destroyed the council movement. Pannekoek, along with many of the movement's main figures, escaped to Holland.

In Holland, Pannekoek began his work on workers' councils. This work represents a life-long attempt to develop Marxism as a truly revolutionary theory of self-liberation of the working class. It is hard to imagine that he would write such a text under the most difficult of conditions during the Nazi invasion of Holland. *Workers' Councils* was first published in 1946 and later translated into English by Pannekoek himself. It has remained largely out of print ever since, at least in its entirety. Fortunately, AK Press reprinted this classic work. The AK Press edition is based on the 1950 Melbourne edition and is spruced up by interviews with Noam Chomsky, Ken Coates, Peter Hitchcock, and Paul Mattick. Contrary to what the cover says, the introduction is done by Robert Barsky, not Noam Chomsky.

Workers' Councils is divided between theoretical and historical material. In 'The Task,' Pannekoek gives an overview of the capitalist system of production, the state, and shop organization, before diving into the reorganization of production and society. The second section, 'The Fight,' takes a critical look at contemporary class struggles and tactics of the time period. The remaining sections take a historical look at 'The foe' in the main industrial nations of the time, WWII, and perspectives in the post-war era. For the purpose of this review I will focus on Pannekoek's theoretical arguments for the council system in the first two sections.

In 'The Task,' Pannekoek describes the transition of labor towards a post-revolutionary system of production and social organization. He asserts, "The task of the working class is to take production into its own hand and to organize it..." (p57). Pannekoek broke from traditional Marxism by stressing that revolutionary struggle is a psychological process. Without downplaying the importance of material elements, he stresses the importance of breaking the ideological hegemony of the capitalist class. For Pannekoek, revolution was a gradual victory of the mind and will.

Pannekoek's post-revolution vision includes a network of autonomous shop level councils where discussions and decisions about local production would take place. All decisions would be made through direct-democracy, and delegates would be selected from among the workers and immediately recallable. In very large shops, with too many workers to feasibly include all in the process, delegates would be selected to represent each sector of the workforce at shop-wide council meetings. Furthermore, the councils would coordinate production on regional, national, and international levels. Unfortunately, Pannekoek gives little attention to the function of the council structure beyond the shop level. Questions of the actual coordination at the regional, national, and international levels are left largely unanswered.

Pannekoek recognized the trade unions as organizations necessary to counter the organization of the capitalists. He saw the links between working class organization, mass action, and class-consciousness, and believed struggle within the trade unions would be a necessary precursor to revolution. Although the initial signs of working class self-activity are present in the traditional labor unions, Pannekoek goes on to critique the dead-end strategies they are prone to in 'The Fight.' He says the trade unions are not revolutionary organizations and would have to be supplanted with working class self-organization, ultimately taking the form of the councils.

Pannekoek contrasts the parliamentarism of the trade union with direct action in times of advanced struggle. He argues that it is only through action taken directly by the workers, without mediation by trade union leadership, that the fight towards psychological victory moves forward. He envisions a long period of increased confrontation between workers and the bourgeoisie in which each direct action taken would strengthen the working class in the battle for power. For Pannekoek, the psychological impact of direct action on the working class was of utmost importance. He gives attention to a handful of working class mass actions taking the form of

wild cats, occupations, sit-ins, political strikes and general strikes. He argues that it is in such actions, and the worker committees that form to coordinate the struggle, that we see the council structure in its initial stages.

Pannekoek goes on to discuss the Russian Revolution of 1927, but he is oddly silent about the events that he was so critical of at the time. He rightly describes the Bolshevik regime as state-capitalist and counterrevolutionary, but hardly mentions the events that led to the annihilation of the soviets. Just as disappointing is the lack of explicit discussion of his experiences in the German council movement and its destruction. Perhaps the greatest insight into the failure of the council movement is given by Paul Mattick in one of the introductory interviews:

“Like anything else, forms of class struggle are historical in the sense that they make their appearance long before their full realization becomes an actual possibility... In either case, the workers’ councils could only eliminate themselves as their organizational form contradicted their limited political and social goals.”

Despite the lack of inclusion of Pannekoek’s experience in the council movement, the text is a great work deserving of serious thought and debate. I would highly recommend Workers’ Councils for anyone seriously thinking about how we go about transforming a reformist labor movement into revolutionary working class self-activity. My reading of the text leads me to believe that Pannekoek would shake his head in disbelief at those who steer clear of the traditional unions and the opportunities to work towards revolutionary goals and organization within them. The conditions necessary for the return and fruition of the councils will come, will the labor be ready?

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