The Soviet System or the Dictatorship of the Proletariat?

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Perhaps the reader thinks he has found a flaw in the above title and that the soviet system and the dictatorship of the proletariat are one and the same thing? No. They are two radically different ideas which, far from being mutually complementary, are mutually opposed. Only an unhealthy party logic could accept a fusion when what really exists is an irreconcilable opposition.

The idea of "soviets" is a well defined expression of what we take to be social revolution, being an element belonging entirely to the constructive side of socialism. The origin of the notion of dictatorship is wholly bourgeois and as such, has nothing to do with socialism. It is possible to harness the two terms together artificially, if it is so desired, but all one would get would be a very poor caricature of the original idea of soviets, amounting, as such, to a subversion of the basic notion of socialism.

The idea of soviets is not a new one, nor is it one thrown up, as is frequently believed, by the Russian Revolution. It arose in the most advanced wing of the European labour movement at a time when the working class emerged from the chrysalis of bourgeois radicalism to become independent. That was in the days when the International Workingmen's Association achieved its grandiose plan to gather together workers from various countries into a single huge union, so as to open up to them a direct route towards their real emancipation. Although the International has been thought of as a broad based organisation composed of professional bodies, its statutes were drafted in such a way as to allow all the socialist tendencies of the day to join with the sole proviso that they agree with the ultimate objective of the organisation: the complete emancipation of the workers.

Naturally enough, at the time of its foundation, the ideas of this great Association were far from being as clearly defined as they were at the Geneva Congress in 1866 or the Lausanne in 1867. The more experienced the International became the more it matured and spread throughout the world as a fighting organisation, the clearer and more objective the thinking of its adepts appeared. The practical activity arising out of the day to day battle between capital and labour led, of itself, to a deeper understanding of basic principles.

After the Brussels congress of 1868 the International had come out in favour of collective ownership of the soil, the subsoil and the instruments of labour, and the groundwork had been laid down for the further development of the International.

At the Basel congress of 1869 the internal evolution of the great workers' association reached its zenith. Apart from the issue of the soil and subsoil, freshly considered by the congress, the chief issue was how workers' unions were to be set up, run and used. A report on this issue, presented by the Belgian Hins and his friends, excited a lively interest at the congress. On this occasion, for the first time, the tasks which the workers' unions were to tackle as well as the importance of those unions was set out in an utterly unmistakable way, reminiscent, to a degree, of the thinking of Robert Owen. Thus it was announced at Basel in clear and unmistakable terms that the trades union, the local federation, was more than merely an ordinary and temporary body whose only reason to exist was capitalist society, and which was fated to disappear when it did. According to what Hins set out, the state socialist view that the workers' unions ought to confine their activities to improving the living conditions of the workers in terms of wages, no more and no less, was radically amended.

The report by Hins and his friends shows how the workers' organisations for the economic struggle can be regarded as cells of the socialist society of the future, and that the International's task is to educate these local organisations to equip them to carry out their historic mission Indeed, the congress did adopt the Belgian view; but we know today that many delegates, espe-

cially those from the German labour organisations, never had any wish to put the resolution into practice within the bound of their influence.

After the Basel congress, and especially after the war of 1870, which thrust the European social movement along quite a different route, it became obvious that there were two tendencies inside the International, tendencies so irreconcilably opposed to one another that this opposition went as far as a split. Later an attempt was made to reduce their disagreements to the level of a personal squabble between Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx, the latter with his General Council in London. There could not be a more mistaken, groundless account than this one, which is based on utter ignorance of the facts. Of course, personal considerations did have a role to play in these clashes, as they usually do in such situations. In any event, it was Marx and Engels who resorted to every conceivable impropriety in their attacks on Bakunin. As a matter of fact, Karl Marx's biographer, the author Eranz Mehring, was unable to keep silent on this fact, since, basically, it was not a question of vain silly squabbling, but of a clash between two ideological outlooks which did and do have a certain natural importance.

In the Latin countries, where the International found its principal support, the workers were active through their organisations of economic struggle. To their eyes, the state was the political agent and defender of the possessing classes, and, this being the case, the seizure of political power was not to be pursued in any guise for it was nothing other than a prelude to a new tyranny and a survival of exploitation. For that reason, they avoided imitating the bourgeoisie by setting up yet another political party that would spawn a new ruling class captained by professional politicians. Their objective was to get control of machines, industry, the soil and the subsoil; and they foresaw correctly that this approach divided them radically from the Jacobin politicians of the bourgeoisie who sacrificed everything for the sake of political power. The Latin internationalists realised that monopoly of ownership had to go, as well as monopoly of power; that the whole life of the society to come had to be founded upon wholly new bases. Taking as their starting point the fact that "man's domination over his fellow man" was a thing of the past, these comrades tried to get to grips with the idea of "the administration of things." They replaced the politics of parties inside the state with the economic politics of labour. Furthermore, they realised that the reorganisation of society in a socialist sense had to be undertaken inside industry itself, this being the root idea behind the notion of the councils (or soviets).

In an extremely clear and precise way, the congresses of the Spanish Regional Federation went more deeply into these ideas of the anti-authoritarian wing of the International, and developed them. That is where the terms "juntas" and "workers' councils" (meaning the same thing as soviets) came from.

The libertarian socialists of the First International realised full well that socialism cannot be decreed by a government, but has to grow, organically, from the bottom up. They understood, also, that it was for the workers alone to undertake the organisation of labour and production and, similarly, distribution for equal consumption. This was the overriding idea which they have opposed to the state socialism of parliamentary politicians.

As the years have passed, and even today, the labour movements of these Latin countries have undergone savage persecutions. This bloody policy can be traced back to the repression of the Paris Commune in 1871. Later, reactionary excesses of that sort spread to Spain and Italy. As a result, the idea of "councils" has receded into the background, since all open propaganda was suppressed and in the clandestine movements the workers' organisation had to set up, militants

were constrained to deploy all their energies, all their resources, to fighting the reaction and defending its victims.

Revolutionary Syndicalism and the Idea of Councils

The development of revolutionary syndicalism has unearthed this idea and breathed new life into it. During the most active period of French revolutionary syndicalism between 1900 and 1907 the councils idea was pursued in its most comprehensive, well defined form.

A glance at the writings of Pouget, Griffuelhes, Monatte, Yvetot and some others, especially Pelloutier, is enough to persuade one that neither in Russia nor anywhere else has an iota been added to what the propagandists of revolutionary syndicalism formulated fifteen or twenty years before the Russian events of 1917.

Throughout those years the socialist workers' parties rejected the idea of councils out of hand. Most of those who today are advocates of the idea of soviets (especially in Germany) scorned it yesterday as some "new utopia." Lenin, no less, stated to the president of the St. Petersburg delegates' council in 1905 that the councils system was an outmoded institution with which the party had nothing in common.

And so this notion of councils, the credit for which is due to the revolutionary syndicalists, marks the most important point and constitutes the keystone of the international labour movement, thanks to which we shall be permitted to add that the councils system is the only institution likely to lead to socialism becoming a reality, since any other path will be a mistaken one. "Utopia" has won over "sciencificism."

Equally, it is beyond question that the council idea arises naturally out of a libertarian socialist vision which has so taken root in a large part of the international labour movement, as opposed to the state idea with its wake of bourgeois ideological traditions.

The "Dictatorship of the Proletariat," an Inheritance from the Bourgeoisie

That is all that can be said of dictatorship, since it is not a product of socialist thinking. Dictatorship is no child of the labour movement, but a regrettable inheritance from the bourgeoisie, passed into the proletarian camp to guarantee its "happiness." Dictatorship is closely linked with the lust for political power, which is likewise bourgeois in its origin.

Dictatorship is one of the forms which the state, ever greedy for Power, is apt to assume. It is the state on a war footing. Like other advocates of the state idea, the supporters of dictatorship would—provisionally (?)—impose their will upon the people. This concept alone is an impediment to social revolution, the very life's blood of which is precisely the constructive participation and direct initiative of the masses.

Dictatorship is the denial, the destruction of the organic being, of the natural form of organisation, which is from the bottom upwards. Some claim that the people are not yet sufficiently mature to take charge of their own destiny. So there has to be a ruler over the masses, tutelage by an "expert" minority. The supporters of dictatorship could have the best intentions in the world, but the logic of Power will oblige them always to take the path of the most extreme despotism.

Our state socialists adopted the notion of dictatorship from that pre-bourgeois party, the Jacobins. That party damned striking as a crime and banned workers' organisations under pain of death. The most active spokesmen for this overbearing conduct were Saint-Just and Couthon, while Robespierre operated under the same influence.

The false, onesided way that bourgeois historians usually depict the Great Revolution has heavily influenced most socialists, and contributed mightily to giving the Jacobin dictatorship an ill deserved prestige, while the martyrdom of its chief leaders seems to have increased. Generally, folk are easy prey for the cult of martyrs, which disables them from studied criticism of ideas and deeds.

The creative labour of the French Revolution is well known—it abolished feudalism and the monarchy. Historians have glorified this as the work of the Jacobins and revolutionaries of the Convention, but nonetheless, with the passage of time that picture has turned out to be an absolute falsification of the whole history of the Revolution.

Today we know that this mistaken interpretation is based on the wilful ignorance of historical fact, especially the truth that the bona fide creative work of the Revolution was carried out by the peasants and the proletariat from the towns in defiance of the National Assembly and the Convention. The Jacobins and the Convention were always rather vigorously opposed to radical changes, up until they were a fait accompli, that is, until popular actions imposed such changes upon them. Consequently, the convention's proclamation that the feudal system was abolished was nothing more than an official recognition of inroads made directly by the revolutionary peasants into the old oppressive system, in spite of the fierce opposition they had had to face from the political parties of the day.

As late as 1792, the National Assembly had not touched the feudal system. It was only the following year that the said revolutionary Assembly condescended to prove "the mob of the countryside" right by sanctioning the abolition of feudal rights, something the people had already accomplished by popular decision. The same thing, or almost, goes for the official abolition of the monarchy.

Jacobin Traditions and Socialism

The first founders of a popular socialist movement in France came from the Jacobin camp, so it is natural that the political inheritance of 1792 should weigh heavily upon them.

When Babeuf and Darthey set up the conspiracy of "The Equals," they aimed to turn France, by means of dictatorship, into an agrarian communist state and, as communists, they appreciated that they would have to set about solving the economic question if they were ever to attain the ideal of the Great Revolution. But, as Jacobins, "The Equals" believed they could attain their objective by reinforcing the state, conferring vast powers on it. With the Jacobins, belief in the omnipotence of the state reached its acme and so thoroughly permeated them that they were incapable of conceiving any alternative scheme to follow.

Half-dead, Babeuf and Darthey were dragged to the guillotine, but their ideas lived on among the people, taking refuge in secret societies, like the "Egalitarians" during the reign of Louis Philippe. Men like Barbes and Blanqui worked along the same lines, fighting for a dictatorship of the proletariat designed to make the aims of the communists a reality.

It was from these men that Marx and Engels inherited the notion of a dictatorship of the proletariat, which they set out in their Communist Manifesto. By that means they were to arrive at a central power with uncontested capabilities, the task of which it would be to crush the potential of the bourgeoisie through radical coercive laws and, when the time was ripe, reorganise society in the spirit of state socialism.

Marx and Engels abandoned bourgeois democracy for the socialist camp, their thinking profoundly shaped by Jacobin influence. What is more, the socialist movement was, at that time, insufficiently developed to come up with an authentic path of its own. The socialism of both of the two leaders was more or less subject to bourgeois traditions going back to the French Revolution.

Everything for the Councils

Thanks to the growth of the labour movement in the days of the international, socialism found itself in a position to shrug off the last remnants of bourgeois traditions and to become entirely independent. The concept of councils abandoned the notion of the state and of power politics under any guise whatever. Similarly, it was diametrically opposed to any suggestion of dictatorship. In fact, it not only attempted to strip away the instruments of power from the forces that possessed them and from the state, but it also tended to increase its own sway as far as possible.

The forerunners of the council system appreciated well that along with the exploitation of man by man would have to vanish also the domination of man by man. They realised that the state, being the organised power of the ruling classes, cannot be transformed into an instrument for the emancipation of labour. Likewise, it was their view that the primary task of the social revolution has to be the demolition of the old power structure, to remove the possibility of any new form of exploitation and retreat.

Let no one object that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" cannot be compared to run of the mill dictatorship because it is the dictatorship of a class.

Dictatorship of a class cannot exist as such, for it ends up, in the last analysis, as being the dictatorship of a given party which arrogates to itself the right to speak for that class. Thus, the liberal bourgeoisie, in their fight against despotism, used to speak in the name of the "people." In parties which have never enjoyed the use of power, the lust for power or the desire to wield it assume an extremely dangerous form.

Those who have recently won power are even more obnoxious than those who possessed it. The example of Germany is illuminating in this respect: the Germans are currently living under the powerful dictatorship of the professional politicians of the social democracy and the centralistic functionaries of the trade unions. They find no measure too base or brutal to apply and subdue the members of their "own" class who dare to take issue with them. When these gentlemen, reneging on socialism, "went under" they tossed away even those gains made by bourgeois revolutions guaranteeing a certain degree of freedom and personal inviolability. What's more they have also fathered the most horrendous police system, going so far as to arrest anyone who is ungrateful to the authorities and rendering him harmless for a time at least. The celebrated "lettres de cachet" of the French despots and the administrative deportation of the Russian tsarist system have been exhumed and applied by these unique champions of democracy.

Needless to say, these new despots pratel on insistently about support for a constitution that guarantees every possible right to good Germans; but that constitution exists only on paper. Even the French republican constitution of 1793 suffered from the same flaw—it was never put into effect. Robespierre and his henchmen tried to explain themselves by stating that the fatherland was in danger. Consequently, the "Incorruptible" and his men maintained a dictatorship which led to Thermidor, the disgraceful rule of the Directory, and, ultimately, the dictatorship of the sword under Napoleon. At the present time we in Germany have reached our Directory: the only thing missing is the man who will play the role of Napoleon.

We already know that a revolution cannot be made with rosewater. And we know, too, that the owning classes will never yield up their privileges spontaneously. On the day of victorious revolution the workers will have to impose their will on the present owners of the soil, of the subsoil and of the means of production, which cannot be done—let us be clear on this—without the workers taking the capital of society into their own hands, and, above all, without their having demolished the authoritarian structure which is, and will continue to be, the fortress keeping the masses of the people under dominion. Such an action is, without doubt, an act of liberation; a proclamation of social justice; the very essence of social revolution, which has nothing in common with the utterly bourgeois principle of dictatorship.

The fact that a large number of socialist parties have rallied to the idea of councils, which is the proper mark of libertarian socialist and revolutionary syndicalists, is a confession, recognition that the tack they have taken up until now has been the product of a falsification, a distortion, and that with the councils the labour movement must create for itself a single organ capable of carrying into effect the unmitigated socialism that the conscious proletariat longs for. On the other hand, it ought not to be forgotten that this abrupt conversion mns the risk of introducing many alien features into the councils concept, features, that is, with no relation to the original tasks of socialism, and which have to be eliminated because they pose a threat to the further development of the councils. These alien elements are able only to conceive things from the dictatorial viewpoint. It must be our task to face up to this risk and warn our class comrades against experiments which cannot bring the dawn of social emancipation any nearer, which indeed, to the contrary, positively postpone it.

Consequently, our advice is as follows: Everything for the councils or soviets! No power above them! A slogan which at the same time will be that of the social revolutionary.

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