Oisín Mac Giollamóir
Left Communism and Its Ideology
Introductory notes towards a Critique
2007

Retrieved on 15th November 2021 from www.wsm.ie and www.wsm.ie
Published in *Red & Black Revolution* No. 13 — Autumn 2007.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

Left Communism and Its Ideology

Introductory notes towards a Critique

Oisín Mac Giollamóir

2007

Contents

- Giacinto Menotti Serrati: leader of the PSI during the 'missed' Italian revolution of 1919–1920.
- Filippo Turati: co-founder of PSI. Became a reformist and opposed the revolutionary working class during the Biennio Rosso.
- USI (Italian Syndicalist Union): Revolutionary Anarcho-syndicalist union. Had 800,000 at its peak in September 1920.

Anarchism is today finally emerging out of its long held position as 'the conscience of the workers' movement', as the eternal critic of Leninism and state centred politics.

It long took the side of the working class against the Party, a position Lenin mocked when he wrote: "The mere presentation of the question—"dictatorship of the party or dictatorship of the class[1]; dictatorship (party) of the leaders, or dictatorship (party) of the masses?"—testifies to most incredibly and hopelessly muddled thinking…to contrast, in general, the dictatorship of the masses with a dictatorship of the leaders is ridiculously absurd, and stupid."[2] Interestingly this was not written about anarchists, but rather about the position held by a Dutch-German Marxist tendency that was part of the Comintern. This tendency and others comprise what is known as 'left-communism'. *(Pic: Workers of Fiat in Italy take over the Factories)*

There has long been a close relationship between anarchism and left-communism, as left-communism took up many of the positions held by anarchists. The Dutch-German left developed positions that are indistinguishable from those that have long been found within the anarchist movement. While anarchism influenced left-communism in practice[3], left-communism and Marxist tendencies closely related to it have been a major theoretical influence on anarchism, in particular over the last thirty years.

While left communist theories have indeed contributed greatly to the anarchist movement and to anarchist theory,

[1] The term dictatorship of the proletariat is used to refer essentially to the institutions through which the exploited and excluded bring about a revolutionary change in the structure of society. It does not necessarily refer to a party dictatorship.

[2] Lenin, V.I. 'Left-wing Communism an Infantile Disorder'

[3] See the influence of the FAUD on the Dutch-German left and the IWW on the Italian Left.

a number of significant theoretical and tactical mistakes are evident in them. In this article I will trace the development of these theories and give an introduction to the history of the German Revolution of 1918–19 and the Biennio Rosso[4] of 1919–20 in Italy. I will also attempt to highlight the problems of these theories and insist on the need to develop an anarchist program for today based on the situation of our class today, as opposed to based on a-historical principles.

What is left communism?

Left communism is extremely difficult to define. There are various strands of left communism that emerged at different points in the period between 1917 and 1928. Aufheben[5] writes "The 'historic ultra-left'[6] refers to a number of such currents which emerged out of one of the most significant moments in the struggle against capitalism — the revolutionary wave that ended the First World War."[7] Left communism is generally divided into two wings: the Dutch-German left and the Italian left.[8] Between the two groups there was no love lost. Gilles Dauvé, originally a Bordigist, writes: "Although both were attacked in Lenin's 'Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disor-

[4] The 'missed' Italian revolution of 1919–1920, in English: Two Red Years

[5] Aufheben say that they recognise 'the moment of truth in versions of class struggle anarchism, the German and Italian lefts and other tendencies.' libcom.org

[6] Ultra leftism is a derisive synonym for left communism. Although the term ultra leftism is normally used pejoratively, it is not in this case as Aufheben consider themselves to be, to some degree, part of this tendency.

[7] Aufheben #11, 'Communist Theory — Beyond the Ultra-Left?' www.geocities.com

[8] In most countries where there was a party aligned to the Third International there was a left communist tendency. Aside from the Dutch-German and Italian left, the most significant left communist tendencies were in Russia and Britain.

- KAPD (German Communist Workers Party): Dutch-German left communist party. Split/was expelled from the KPD. Believed that the revolution would not be made by a political party but could only be made by the working class itself organised in its own autonomous organisations.

- KPD (German Communist Party): Founded in 1919, split later that year. The KPD ultimately followed the line laid out by Moscow and was to become a major party. After World War II, in East Germany it merged with the Social Democratic Party of Germany to form the Socialist Unity Part of Germany (SED). The SED governed East Germany in an effective single party dictatorship from 1946 to 1989.

- PCI (Italian Communist Party): Split from PSI in January 1921. First led by Bordiga, then Gramsci. Part of the Comintern and persistently supported the Soviet Union. Collapsed with the USSR.

- PSI (Italian Socialist Party): Once revolutionary socialist party founded by Filippo Turati and former anarchists Anna Kuliscioff and Andrea Costa. Betrayed the revolutionary working class in the 'missed' Italian revolution of 1919–1920

- Anton Pannekoek: Perhaps the leading intellectual of the Dutch-German Left.

- SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany): Prior to its support for the war drive in 1914, the SPD was universally considered the world's greatest revolutionary Marxist party. Indeed the pre-1914 SPD is to this day the archetypal Marxist party. In the German revolution of 1918–20 it played a counter-revolutionary role.

- AAUD-E (General Workers Union of Germany- Unitary Organisation): Split from AAUD due to the interfering influence of the KAPD.
- Aufheben: A British Libertarian Communist group who publish an annual journal of the same name.
- Biennio Rosso: The 'missed' Italian revolution of 1919–1920, in English: Two Red Years
- Amadeo Bordiga: The leader of the Italian Left
- CGL (General Confederation of Labour): PSI led Trade Union federation.
- Comintern: Third International. Attempt at international network of revolutionary groups, ultimately became led by Moscow and the Russian Communist Party.
- Gilles Dauvé: Co-author of 'Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement' originally a Bordigist.
- Dyelo Truda Group: The Dyelo Truda (Workers' Truth) Group was a group of Russian anarchist exiles based in Paris. They are best known for publishing the 'Organisational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists (Draft)', a document that gives its name to the platformist tendency in anarchism, of which the WSM, the publishers of this magazine, is a part.
- Antonio Gramsci: A renowned and highly influential Italian Marxist, perhaps the most influential West European Marxist intellectual of the twentieth century. He came to prominence as editor of the journal l'Ordine Nouvo and went on to lead the Italian Communist Party after Bordiga's departure. Died in prison under Mussolini's dictatorship.

der', Pannekoek regarded Bordiga as a weird brand of Leninist, and Bordiga viewed Pannekoek as a distasteful mixture of marxism and anarcho-syndicalism. In fact, neither took any real interest in the other, and the "German" and "Italian" communist lefts largely ignored each other."[9]

The Dutch-German and Italian lefts were tendencies within the Comintern that ultimately broke with the Comintern and critiqued it from the left. As such left communism, or ultra leftism, is often defined by its opposition to 'leftism'.

Aufheben define leftism thus: "It can be thought of in terms of those practices which echo some of the language of communism but which in fact represent the movement of the left-wing of capital."[10] In other words leftism describes those who are nominally communist but in fact are not. According to left communists, leftists are those who supported the Soviet Union in any manner, those who support or participate in Trade Unions, those who participate in parliament, those who support national liberation movements in any manner and those who participate in any type of political coalition with non communists. Left communists on the other hand are opposed to participation or support for any of these types of struggle because they are not communist or because they are anti working class. As such, left communists often define themselves negatively. They oppose themselves to those who do not hold 'real' communist positions. They spend a lot of effort denouncing those who don't hold these communist positions of absolute and practical opposition to the USSR, the Trade Unions, parliament, national liberation movements, political coalitions etc.

In order to fully understand left communism and how and why it adopted these positions, we need to look at its development. In the revolutionary wave that followed the Russian

[9] Dauvé, G. 'Note on Pannekoek and Bordiga' libcom.org

[10] Aufheben #11, 'From Operaismo to Autonomist Marxism' www.geocities.com

revolution, Germany and Italy were the two places that were closest to having a successful communist revolution; they were also the two places with the largest left communist tendencies.

The Dutch-German Left

The German Revolution 1918–1919

In Germany in 1918 there was a wave of mass wildcat strikes that ultimately led to a revolution breaking out in November which ended World War One. Sailors mutinied and workers' councils were set up across the country. The SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) a few years earlier was universally considered the world's greatest revolutionary Marxist party, but had in 1914 supported the drive to war. It took part in this revolution despite opposing it. Thereby, it "managed to get a majority vote at the first National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils in favour of elections to a constituent assembly and for dissolving the councils in favour of that parliament. At the same time the trade unions worked hand in hand with management to get revolutionary workers dismissed and to destroy independent council activity in the factories. Councils against parliament and trade unions became the watch word of revolutionaries."[11]

At the turn of the year the KPD (German Communist Party) was founded. On the basis of their recent experiences, the majority of workers in the KPD developed a revolutionary critique of parliamentary activism and raised the slogan 'All Power to the Workers' Councils'. However, the leaders of the party, including Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, opposed this on the basis that it was anarchist[12]. The anti-parliamentarian ma-

[11] Aufheben #8 'Left Communism and the Russian Revolution' www.geocities.com

[12] Dutch Group of International Communists (GIK), 'Origins of the Movement for Workers' Councils in Germany' libcom.org

the Dyelo Truda group writes that anarchism is 'a social movement' not a philosophy, they mean it. We are interested in class struggle as it is, not as it is idealised.

In our analysis of history we look for class struggle, but we must not look for it as an independent trend: independent, separate or autonomous from capital and capitalist ideologies. It is always only as a trend within capitalism, and previous forms of class based society, that class struggle exists and interests us.

Class struggle arises from the contradiction of capital. If capital's effects can be found everywhere then likewise its contradictions can be found everywhere. Or put otherwise, the revolutionary subject emerges due to the contradiction between people's needs and desires and the limits put on them under capitalism.

Our politics must begin always at this point; at the contradiction in our daily lives between our needs, our desires, what we see is possible and the constraints capital puts on us by operating according to an alien logic that forces us to abandon our needs, our desires, our dreams and work according to its dictates. Our revolutionary politics must always begin with working class resistance to this experience, it must be an intervention not to assert or defend 'communism' or 'the working class' as ideal forms against impurities, but rather to search for the quickest, speediest and most painless route from here to where we want to go.

Glossary

- AAUD (General Workers Union of Germany): Network of revolutionary workplace groups, closely linked to the KAPD.

not always already-realised in the working class. We must remember that the working class is not communist rather it is capable of producing communism. The working class does not interest us because of what it is, it interests us because of what it can do (and obviously because we are part of it).

Secondly, as Guy Debord noted: "history has no object distinct from what takes place within it".[57] Communism arises today as a possibility not as a future to be realised. It is not a real future towards which we work. The communist project is not teleological. In simpler terms the idea that history develops towards a fixed end, communism, is completely wrong. Communism is something that emerges and develops out of struggle today. Communism is not something that can be discovered or defended rather it emerges from class struggle. Therefore, all we can do is engage in class struggle and try to push things forward, try to turn the class that has the potential to create communism into the class that does create communism.

The job of communists is not to defend the 'interests' (i.e. the communist program) of the working class from corruption, as so many left communists seem to believe. Firstly, because there is no communist program to be defended. Secondly, because the working class does not have any interests outside of struggle, i.e. it has not permanent interests which can be defended.

The job of communists is to get stuck down into the grim and grit of real struggle as it is happening with all the contradictions that are involved in it. We must be active in class struggle pushing hard for anarchist-communism. Wherever class antagonism emerges as revolutionaries we must be there advancing the revolutionary cause.

When Marx writes that communism is 'the real movement' not an ideal, when Engels writes that communism is an expression of 'the proletariat in struggle' and not a doctrine, when

[57] Debord, G, 'Society of the spectacle', Paragraph 74.

jority were also opposed to the 'Trade Unions' on the basis of their experience of the German social democratic trade unions opposing the revolutionary movement and actively trying to crush it. On this point the leadership also opposed the majority. Ultimately, in October 1919, these disagreements led to the leadership expelling over half of the party's membership.[13]

These expelled members went on to form the left communist KAPD (German Communist Workers Party). The KAPD left the Comintern after the Third Congress in 1921 for reasons that anarchists would be very sympathetic towards. They believed that the revolution would not be made by a political party but could only be made by the working class itself organized in its own autonomous organisations. The organisation that the KAPD worked within was the AAUD[14] (General Workers Union of Germany); at its height this was an organisation of around 300,000 workers.[15] The AAUD emerged during the German Revolution in 1919. Jan Appel describes its formation: "We arrived at the conclusion that the unions were quite useless for the purposes of the revolutionary struggle, and at a conference of Revolutionary Shop Stewards, the formation of revolutionary factory organisations as the basis for Workers' Councils was decided upon."[16]

Council Communism

Based on their experiences, the left communists in Germany critiqued Lenin's arguments in 'Left-Wing Communism: an Infantile Disorder' firstly on the basis that although the Bolshe-

[13] Ibid.

[14] The Dutch left communists drew a distinction between workplace organisations like the AAUD, the IWW and the British Shop Stewards movement and 'Trade Unions'.

[15] It is worth noting that simultaneous to this the anarcho-syndicalist union the FAUD (Free Workers' Union of Germany) had roughly 200,000 members. The membership of the AAUD and FAUD often overlapped. Ibid.

[16] Appell, J., 'Autobiography of Jan Appel' libcom.org

vik model of organisation made sense in Russia, as Germany was more industrially developed different forms of proletarian struggle were needed.[17] They argued that through self organisation in their factories workers laid the basis for setting up workers' councils. They argued that this form of organisation was the single form of organisation suitable for a revolutionary struggle of the working class. As such, they argued against activity in Trade Unions[18], parliament and the primacy of the party.

The KAPD aimed not to represent or lead the working class, but rather to enlighten it[19], a similar project to the idea advanced by the Dyelo Truda group: "All assistance afforded to the masses in the realm of ideas must be consonant with the ideology of anarchism; otherwise it will not be anarchist assistance. 'Ideologically assist' simply means: influence from the ideas point of view, direct from the ideas point of view [a leadership of ideas]."[20] However, some left communists, such as Otto Rühle, felt even this was too much. They left the KAPD and AAUD and, objecting to the involvement of the KAPD in the AAUD, set up AAUD-E (General Workers Union of Germany – Unitary Organisation).

The majority of those who claim a legacy from the Dutch-German Left, those who call themselves council communists, tend to take the position of Rühle and the AAUD-E. For that

[17] Gorter, H., 'Open Letter to Comrade Lenin', Antagonism Press, pp.16–26

[18] It is important to note that the Dutch-German left did not reject workplace organization but rather the reformist unions that existed in Germany. Even of these Gorter wrote that "It is only at the beginning of the revolution, when the proletariat, from a member of capitalist society, is turned into the annihilator of this society, that the Trade Union finds itself in opposition to the proletariat" -Open Letter p.28

[19] Dauvé, G. 'Leninism and the Ultra Left', in 'Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement', p.48

[20] Dyelo Truda Group, 'Reply to Anarchism's Confusionists' hp://www.nestormakhno.info/english/confus.htm

civilised countries at the present time….Communism, insofar as it is a theory, is the theoretical expression of the position of the proletariat in this struggle and the theoretical summation of the conditions for the liberation of the proletariat."[55]

Of course the simple fact that anarchism/communism is not an ideal to be realized or a set of principles but a real movement is so obvious it may seem strange to emphasis it. Anarchists have long realized this, the Dyelo Truda group writes: "Anarchism is no beautiful fantasy, no abstract notion of philosophy, but a social movement of the working masses."[56]

But what is the 'real movement which abolishes the present state of things'? The answer of course is class struggle.

Conclusion

While the Italian Left insisted on the communist program that was to be realised by the party for the working class, the Dutch-German Left insisted that the class did not need a party or program; indeed they would be obstacles to the working class realising communism.

In the Italian Left we find the communist program separated from the working class. In the Dutch-German Left we find the exact same. The difference is that the Italian Left insists on defending the communist program from impurity while the German Left insists on defending the working class. The solution surely is to unite the two, the working class and communism, and say 'The working class is the communist subject'. This is the position adopted by most left communists today.

However, the first problem with this position is that the working class is not a communist subject. Communism is

[55] Engels, F. 'The Communists and Karl Heinzen', Second Article, www.marxists.org

[56] Dyelo Truda Group, 'Organizational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists (Draft)', www.anarkismo.net

an article published in Bordiga's journal 'Il programma comunista': "The proletariat abandons its programme in periods of defeat. This programme is only defended by a weak minority. Only the programme-party always emerges reinforced by the struggle. The struggle from 1926 to today proves that fully."[51]

In all the parties of the Italian Left you find a similar insistence of their role as defenders of the invariant communist program of the proletariat. While they differ over what exactly the invariant doctrine/program of communism is[52] the insistence on the real existence of an invariant doctrine/program runs through all of them.

However as has been pointed out by many, communism "is not fundamentally about the adoption of a set of principles, lines and positions."[53] As Marx writes: "Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence."[54] Even Engels writes, "Communism is not a doctrine but a movement; it proceeds not from principles but from facts. The Communists do not base themselves on this or that philosophy as their point of departure but on the whole course of previous history and specifically its actual results in the

[51] Camatte, J., 'Origin and Function of the Party Form' www.geocities.com

[52] In 1952 the Italian Left split with, on the one hand Bordiga and those around Il Programma Comunista, and Damen and those around Battaglia Comunista on the other. Damen opposed work in the trade unions while supporting parliamentary activity, he also opposed absolutely national liberation movements, while Bordiga took the other side of these debates. The four International Communist Parties all descend from Bordiga, while the International Communist Current and the International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party descend from the Damen side.

[53] Aufheben #11, 'Communist Theory — Beyond the Ultra-Left?' www.geocities.com

[54] Engels, F, & Marx, K. 'German Ideology' in 'Collected Works: Vol. 5', p.49

reason they refuse to form political organisations. Dauvé explains the theory thus: "any revolutionary organisation coexisting with the organs created by the workers themselves, and trying to elaborate a coherent theory and political line, must in the end attempt to lead the workers. Therefore revolutionaries do not organise themselves outside the organs "spontaneously" created by the workers: they merely exchange and circulate information and establish contacts with other revolutionaries; they never try to define a general theory or strategy."[21]

Pannekoek wrote in 1936 "The old labor movement is organised in parties. The belief in parties is the main reason for the impotence of the working class; therefore we avoid forming a new party—not because we are too few, but because a party is an organisation that aims to lead and control the working class. In opposition to this, we maintain that the working class can rise to victory only when it independently attacks its problems and decides its own fate. The workers should not blindly accept the slogans of others, nor of our own groups but must think, act, and decide for themselves. This conception is in sharp contradiction to the tradition of the party as the most important means of educating the proletariat. Therefore many, though repudiating the Socialist and Communist parties, resist and oppose us. This is partly due to their traditional concepts; after viewing the class struggle as a struggle of parties, it becomes difficult to consider it as purely the struggle of the working class, as a class struggle."[22]

While the idea of working class struggle being 'purely the struggle of the working class' is essential, it hides major theoretical and practical problems. Firstly what does it mean to take the side of the class and as opposed to a party? What does the working class without a party look like? What does is mean

[21] Dauvé, G. 'Leninism and the Ultra Left', in 'Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement', p.48

[22] Pannekoek, A., 'Party and Class' in 'Bordiga Vs. Pannekoek', Antagonism Press, p.31

to reject parties? If we take Dauvé's understanding, that this rejection of partyism is a rejection of any attempt 'to elaborate a coherent theory and political line' then we face a problem[23]. If any attempt to elaborate a coherent theory and political line is forbidden then how can the class develop a coherent theory and political line to guide itself through a revolution and to victory? How can the class think strategically if strategic thinking is banned lest it be oppressive or vanguardist?

In a revolution there will be a number of conflicting theories and political lines being put forward. To claim otherwise is highly naïve. If those of us who believe that 'the emancipation of the working classes must be achieved by the working classes themselves'[24] don't enter the revolution prepared with a program explaining how this can be achieved the revolution will, like all prior workers' revolutions, fail.

It was precisely the lack of a program that spelled the failure of the anti-state position in Russia and in Spain[25].

The Dyelo Truda group explains the failure in Russia:

> "We have fallen into the habit of ascribing the anarchist movement's failure in Russia in 1917–1919 to the Bolshevik Party's statist repression, which is a serious error. Bolshevik repression hampered the anarchist movement's spread during the revolution, but it was only one obstacle. Rather, it was the anarchist movement's own internal ineffectuality which was one of the chief causes of that fail-

[23] As Pannekoek defines the party as "a grouping according to views, conceptions", Dauvé's interpretation seems fair.

[24] By this we mean the working class must emancipate itself through the use of its autonomous institution of social power [soviets, councils etc.] and not through the representational process of a party seizing control of the state 'for' the working class.

[25] On the failure of the Spanish revolution, see 'Towards a Fresh Revolution' by the 'Friends of Durruti' Group and 'The revolutionary message of the 'Friends of Durruti'' by George Fontenis.

Bordiga and the Party

The party failed to take off. It fact many of the 58,783 that voted for it in the PSI left. Within a year the membership had fallen to 24,638.[48]

A major reason for this was that the Biennio Rosso of 1919–20 had ended. A revolutionary opportunity was missed and many simply ceased to be engaged in revolutionary class struggle. Bizarrely this did not bother Bordiga or the PCI. Bordiga wrote: "…the centre of the doctrine…is not the concept of the class struggle but that of its development into the dictatorship of the proletariat, exercised by the latter alone, in a single organization, excluding other classes, and with energetic coercive force, thus under the guidance of the party." In other words, for Bordiga the issue was not class struggle but the purity of the communist program and the ability of the party to seize control of the state. Loren Goldner notes: "For Bordiga, program was everything, a gate-receipt notion of numbers was nothing. The role of the party in the period of ebb was to preserve the program and to carry on the agitational and propaganda work possible until the next turn of the tide, not to dilute it while chasing ephemeral popularity."[49] Bordiga wrote: "When from the invariant doctrine we draw the conclusion that the revolutionary victory of the working class can only be achieved with the class party and its dictatorship"[50] Bordiga was fully comfortable with the party being small and isolated away from class struggle. What was important for him was that it was fully communist and defended the communist program from those who would dilute it or pervert it from its course, from its realization. Jacque Camatte explained this position in early 1961 in

[48] Davidson, A. 'The Theory and Practice of Italian Communism: Vol. I', p.103

[49] Goldner, L., 'Communism is the Material Human Community: Amadeo Bordiga Today', home.earthlink.net

[50] Bordiga, A. 'Considerations on the party's organic activity when the general situation is historically unfavourable' www.marxists.org

a communist party should and would be able to carry out such an undertaking."[45]

Since 1915 Bordiga had been insisting on the need for a theoretically pure communist party. After a second revolutionary upsurge in September 1920 he got his way.

Lynn Williams describes this revolutionary upsurge: "Between the 1st and 4th of September metal workers occupied factories throughout the Italian peninsula…the occupations rolled forward not only in the industrial heartland around Milan, Turin and Genoa but in Rome, Florence, Naples and Palermo, in a forest of red and black flags and a fanfare of workers bands… Within three days 400,000 workers were in occupation. As the movement spread to other sectors, the total rose to over half a million. Everyone was stunned by the response."[46] Gramsci once again threw himself into the struggle, while Turati and the reformists went as far as to advise the government to use force against the occupiers of the factories.[47] Ultimately due to the complete betrayal by the PSI and the CGL of the working class, the revolutionary opportunity was missed. After this, Bordiga took his chance to push for a split and by threatening to go it alone, brought Gramsci with him. At the Livorno Congress of the PSI in January 1921, the party split. 14,965 voted for Turati and the reformists, 58,783 voted for the Communists (Bordiga and Gramsci) and for a split and 98,028 voted for Serrati and unity. So on the 21 January, the PCI (Italian Communist Party) was founded.

[45] Bordiga, A., 'Seize power or seize the factory?' www.marxists.org

[46] Quoted in Wetzel, T. 'Italy 1920', pp.11–12

[47] Davidson, A. 'The Theory and Practice of Italian Communism: Vol. I', p.96

ure, an ineffectuality emanating from the vagueness and indecisiveness that characterized its main policy statements on organization and tactics.

"Anarchism had no firm, hard and fast opinion regarding the main problems facing the social revolution, an opinion needed to satisfy the masses who were carrying out the revolution. Anarchists were calling for a seizure of the factories, but had no well-defined homogeneous notion of the new production and its structures. Anarchists championed the communist device "from each according to abilities, to each according to needs," but they never bothered to apply this precept to the real world…Anarchists talked a lot about the revolutionary activity of the workers themselves, but they were unable to direct the masses, even roughly, towards the forms that such activity might assume…They incited the masses to shrug off the yoke of authority, but they did not indicate how the gains of revolution might be consolidated and defended. They had no clear cut opinion and specific action policies with regard to lots of other problems. Which is what alienated them from the activities of the masses and condemned them to social and historical impotence.

"Upwards of twenty years of experience, revolutionary activity, twenty years of efforts in anarchist ranks, and of effort that met with nothing but failures by anarchism as an organizing movement: all of this has convinced us of the necessity of a new comprehensive anarchist party organisa-

tion rooted in one homogenous theory, policy and tactic."[26]

While the German Left neglected the need for a program and denounced all parties as oppressive or at least as vanguardist, the Italian Left took a completely different angle.

The Italian Left

Bordiga and the Biennio Rosso[27]

The Italian Left was in its early stages under the political tutelage of one man: Amadeo Bordiga. After joining the Youth Federation of the PSI (Italian Socialist Party) Bordiga quickly rose to prominence by aligning himself with the golden boy of that Federation; Benito Mussolini. The vitality of the Youth federation was the main reason for the PSI growing from 20,459 in 1912 to 47,724 in 1914. Ultimately, Bordiga broke with Mussolini on the question of supporting World War One. Bordiga asserted that supporting wars was a betrayal of Marxist 'principles'. He was intransigent on points of principle and on the question of the communist program and defended a rigid textual analysis of Marx. He wrote: 'By Marxism we understand the method laid down by Marx and many others, that …culminates in the diagnosis of the daily class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat, constructing a prophecy and a program with a view to the proletarian triumph'[28] Bordiga's orthodoxy set him firmly against the revisionism of the leaders of the PSI.

[26] Dyelo Truda Group, 'Reply to Anarchism's Confusionists' hp://www.nestormakhno.info/english/confus.htm

[27] For an excellent account of the forgotten and ignored anarchist involvement in this period of Italian history see Dadà, 'A. Class War, Reaction & the Italian Anarchists, Studies for a Libertarian Alternative.'

[28] Davidson, A. 'The Theory and Practice of Italian Communism: Vol. I', Merlin Press p.78

factory will be conquered by the working class — and not only by the workforce employed in it, which would be too weak and non-communist — only after the working class as a whole has seized political power. Unless it has done so, the Royal Guards, military police, etc. — in other words, the mechanism of force and oppression that the bourgeoisie has at its disposal, its political power apparatus -will see to it that all illusions are dispelled."[42]

On this Bordiga raises two significant issues. Firstly, as noted, until the revolutionary class has seized power, thereby removing all power from the hand of the bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie will use its state to crush the working class, even if it has to wait almost a full year to do this as happened in Spain. Secondly communism is not simply the seizing of control of the factory or the capitalist enterprise by those that work in it. Communism is not transforming workplaces into democratic co-operatives, as Bordiga notes: "revolution is not a question of the form of organization."[43] Communism is when wage labour and the enterprise is abolished and all capital is captured by the working class as a whole and put to work for the benefit of the human community, not for profit. As Bordiga writes elsewhere: "Socialism resides entirely in the revolutionary negation of the capitalist ENTERPRISE, not in granting the enterprise to the factory workers".[44] It is precisely this insistence on the importance of the content of communism, the abolition of wage labour and the market economy with the incumbent division of labour, that makes Bordiga of any interest. A major problem however is in Bordiga's understanding of how the state is destroyed and how the content of communism is realized. He writes: "Only

[42] Bordiga, A., 'Seize power or seize the factory?' www.marxists.org

[43] Bordiga, A., 'Party and Class' in 'Bordiga Vs. Pannekoek', Antagonism Press, p. 43

[44] Bordiga, A. 'Proprieté et capital'. Quoted in 'Lip and the Self-Managed Counter Revolution' by Negation, Repressed Distribution, p. 50

He held that a fresh start bringing about a renewal of principle was needed within the party.

By 1918 the toll of World War One for Italy was over 680,000 dead and over a million wounded. The working class flocked to the PSI as it became more and more radicalised. By 1919 the PSI, which just 7 years previously had 20,459 members, had grown to over 200,000. In 1919 as workers returned home from the war they found themselves caught in a spiral of inflation and mass unemployment as the Italian economy struggled to adjust to the influx of returning workers.

Starting in April 1919 and continuing through to August there was widespread popular rioting. The government tried desperately to put down the insurgent workers, killing workers in Milan, Florence, Inola, Taranto, Genoa and other cities. In Turin at the end of August new shop stewards' organisations were formed in the Fiat plant. These shop stewards organisations in turn formed a factory council. This new type of grassroots workers' organisation spread quickly across the workplaces of Turin. Through the use of these factory councils on October 31st the workers adopted a program to restructure the unions turning them into organisations of workers' democracy. This program stated its purpose was to "set in train a practical realisation of the communist society."[29] At a meeting on December 14–15, the proponents of this new factory council system were able to win the endorsement of the entire Turin labour movement. By February 1920 over 150,000 workers in the Turin area alone were organised in the new council system. At a conference of the anarcho-syndicalist union the USI (Italian Syndicalist Union) in early 1920, the USI placed itself firmly on the side of these new organisations and agitated strongly for their development outside of Turin. This saw the

[29] Wetzel, T. 'Italy 1920', Zabalaza Books, p.6

cannot bring forth…a trade union hierarchy which reflects its interests and its revolutionary spirit."[38] Gramsci blamed the failure of the movement simultaneously on the ineffectuality of the leadership of the PSI and the CGL and on the inability of the movement itself to throw up a new leadership, organic intellectuals, who would act as a new hierarchy.

While Gramsci felt the councils were the institutions through which the dictatorship of the proletariat could be exercised, Serrati claimed that the councils could not be used to initiate revolutionary action.[39] He argued that "The dictatorship of the proletariat is the conscious dictatorship of the Socialist Party."[40] On this Bordiga was firmly on the side of Serrati. He argued that through exclusive emphasis on the economic sphere and on the stimulation of consciousness Gramsci had forgotten that the state would not simply disappear in a revolution.[41] Of course on this Bordiga was right, as anarchists learnt so tragically in Spain. He wrote: "It is rumoured that factory councils, where they were in existence, functioned by taking over the management of the workshops and carrying on the work. We would not like the working masses to get hold of the idea that all they need do to take over the factories and get rid or the capitalists is set up councils. This would indeed be a dangerous illusion. The

[38] Davidson, A. 'The Theory and Practice of Italian Communism: Vol. I', p.95

[39] Davidson, A. 'The Theory and Practice of Italian Communism: Vol. I', p.95

[40] Introduction to 'Gramsci's Prison Notebooks', International Publishers, p.xxxiv

[41] The anarchists of the UCAdI (Anarchist Communist Union of Italy) were also aware of this, stating in April 1919: "We must remember that the destruction of the capitalist and authoritarian society is only possible through revolutionary means and that the use of the general strike and the labour movement must not make us forget the more direct methods of struggle against state and bourgeois violence and extreme power." Quoted in 'Dadà, A. Class War, Reaction & the Italian Anarchist', p.15.

USI grow from 300,000 in 1919 to 800,000 at the peak of the movement in September 1920.[30]

In response to these movements, at their Bologna congress in 1919 the PSI adopted a revolutionary program[31]. The following month, on the back of this program, they received 1,800,000 votes making them the biggest party in the Italian parliament.[32] However, despite this program being adopted, the PSI was divided with some in the parliamentary party, such as Filippo Turati, fully opposing the program and actively trying to sabotage it. Turati stated that the PSI must not excite "the blind passions and fatal illusions of the crowd". He claimed parliament was to workers' councils as the city was to the barbaric horde. These sentiments resulted in Bordiga pushing hard for Turati's expulsion from the party. Antonio Gramsci attacked Turati accusing him of having "the mocking skepticism of senility".[33] Even Serrati, the party's centrist leader, at this point was attacking Turati accusing his politics of being based on a 'puerile illusion'. He wrote that is was "...painful that a socialist deputy, one of those in whom the masses most believed, should dedicate more obstinacy and energy to fighting Bolshevism than to opposing all the attempts at the mystification of socialism that are coming...from the bourgeoisie."[34] However this was nothing but words from the party leader and Bordiga attacked Serrati for not expelling Turati. Bordiga also called for an end to the parliamentary party's power (this would undercut Turati's influence) and took up an abstentionist position. He wrote: "Elections, while

[30] Wetzel, T. 'Italy 1920', p.9

[31] This program among other things made the PSI a member of the Comintern.

[32] Davidson p.91

[33] Davidson, A. 'The Theory and Practice of Italian Communism: Vol. I', p.92

[34] Ibid

the bourgeoisie have power and wealth in their hands, will never do anything but confirm this privilege."[35]

The first four months of 1920 saw high levels of struggle in Italy, reaching their peak in April. At the Fiat plant in Turin a general assembly called for a sit-in strike to protest the dismissal of several shop stewards. In response the employers locked out 80,000 workers. In Piedmont, the region of Italy of which Turin is the capital, a general strike ensued involving 500,000 workers. There were also strikes around Genoa lead by the USI and in Milan workers' councils like those in Turin emerged under the influence of the USI. In the rest of the country unions under anarcho-syndicalist influence, such as the independent railway unions and the maritime workers unions, came out in support. However, despite appeals from the Turin movement to the PSI and the PSI-led trade union the CGL (General Confederation of Labour) for the strike to be extended across Italy, the PSI and the CGL failed to act. Gramsci, who was working hard through his journal "l'Ordine Nouvo"[36] to support the council movement, commented bitterly on the PSI leadership: "They went on chattering about soviets and councils while in Piedmont and Turin half a million workers starved to defend the councils that already exist."[37] Ultimately the strike was defeated. Gramsci wrote: "The Turinese working class has been defeated. Among the conditions determining this defeat...was the limitedness of the minds of the leaders of the Italian working class movement. Among the second level conditions determining the defeat is thus the lack of revolutionary cohesion of the entire Italian proletariat, which

[35] Ibid

[36] It is worth noting that despite the oft repeated claim that "l'Ordine Nouvo" was the organ of the factory council movement, this is something of a crass simplification. Consider the fact that in 1920, while "l'Ordine Nouvo" was a weekly paper with a circulation of less than 5,000 the anarchist "Umanitá Nova" had a daily circulation of 50,000.

[37] Wetzel, T. 'Italy 1920', p.10