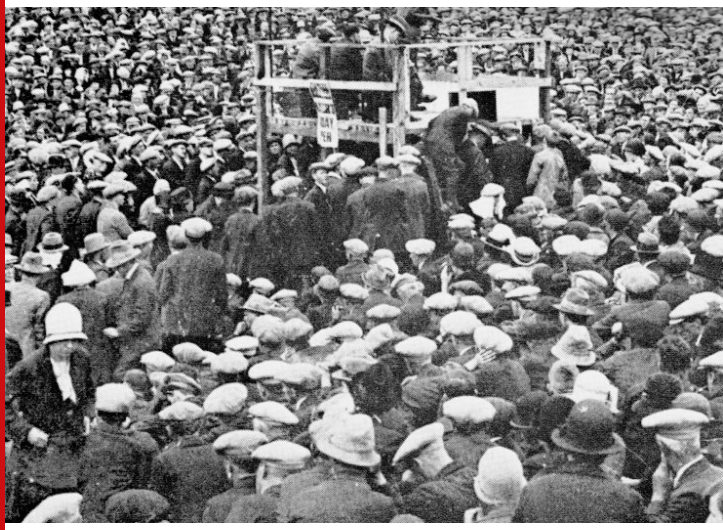
Journal of the Communist Workers' Organisation

Winter/Spring 2026

Revolutionary Perspectives 27

A Critical Juncture for Humanity



1926 General Strike

Condition of the Working Class in Italy

Intersectionality

Review of *Their Wars – Our Dead!*

Damen's Critique of Pannekoek

Revolutionary Perspectives

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A Critical Juncture for Humanity

These perspectives were discussed by the CWO at our last General Meeting in December 2025. The new year opened with the US attack on Venezuela, yet another indication of the drive to generalised war across the world. On our website we have commented on these latest imperialist developments and highlighted some of the internationalist statements released by other groups. If one thing is certain, it's that now is the time for dialogue and cooperation between internationalists who recognise the seriousness of the world situation.

2025 left us with the bitter aftertaste of "ceasefires" and "peace deals" which did nothing to resolve the underlying causes of ongoing conflicts (or indeed even to stop the killing), rumblings of a trillion-dollar AI bubble which could trigger another financial crash, and yet more climate conferences which failed to agree on any real course of action to stave off the collapse of the ecosystem (leaving COP's own president to declare that bypassing official negotiations is now a necessity). Then of course there was the wave of mass protests which, while they demonstrated the deep anger and utter desperation felt by millions around the world, were, at best, only able to replace one corrupt leader with another.

Everywhere we look, we are seeing military preparations, persecution of the "other", and attacks on wages and conditions of workers. But there is no such thing as an absolutely hopeless situation. And in order to understand how humanity can get out of the current impasse, we also need to understand how we got here.

All Empires Fall

The destruction wrought by the Second World War allowed for the mass devaluation of capital, creating the conditions for an economic boom that lasted roughly until the late 1960s. On 15 August 1971, when Nixon announced his decision to end the convertibility of the US dollar to gold, he said his intention was "to create a new prosperity without war". Fifty years later, that vision is now well and truly dead, buried by the very contradictions inherent to the capitalist system itself. The Nixon shock only kicked the can down the road and led to widespread speculation, the flooding of international markets with fictitious capital, massive unemployment and abandonment of much of manufacturing and heavy industry as cheap consumer goods were accessed from low-wage China. Whilst globalisation, privatisation, restructuring, and all the other expedients resorted to in the last half century to revive profits brought short-term promise, in the long-term they failed to cancel out the tendencies towards diminishing profitability in the "real" economy. Continued financial uncertainty and increased competition mean the options for capital are narrowing resulting in the current rise in "pre-emptive" militarism. Global military spending is at post-war record levels while the world is already being torn apart by an amount of conflicts not seen since the Second World War. The drive to war is out in the open.

The financial crash of 2008 was a sign of things to come. Austerity became the word of the day, but not all countries were affected equally. The US – having become the world's foremost superpower in the course of the Second World War and having overcome the challenge from the USSR in the Cold War – was now the starting point for a speculative bubble in housing, which brought about a global economic recession. China – having built a massive labour force under Mao, and opening up to international capital after the reforms of Deng – weathered the storms and capitalised on the opportunity. China, the new "workshop of the world", a young economic empire built on the export of cheap commodities, had by 2014 surpassed the US as the world's largest trading nation, and by 2016, became the world's second-largest economy after the US. According to some estimates, it might take the top spot before the end of the decade.

And this is the critical imperialist conflict. Whilst China continues to stealthily grow both its economy and military, as well as its imperial reach across the world, a debt-ridden USA has been faced with the greatest challenge to the hegemony it established in 1945. The irony is that this challenge is largely an unintended consequence of past US policies in dealing with the crisis of capital accumulation over the last half century. Globalisation was a response to workers in the heartlands of capitalism refusing to accept a cut in living standards from the 1970s onwards. The "solution" was for Western, especially US, capital to move South and East. This brought mass unemployment to the West but the investment helped kick start China's rise as a manufacturing power. The danger was not immediately obvious at the time since the relative decline of US manufacturing was masked by the role of the dollar as the currency of international trade, particularly the oil trade (the petro dollar). This has been the key to US dominance since the Nixon shock. As most countries needed to buy oil, they needed to hold dollars. These dollars, derived from trading in real commodities, were generally held in US bonds. This has allowed the US to fund its deficit by issuing low interest bonds to the rest of the world. The importance of the oil trade being in dollars was shown by the violent overthrow of regimes which proposed trading their oil in other currencies. This was the fate of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya.

Today the US dollar's "exorbitant privilege" is under a far greater threat from China and Russia. In its place an alternative payment system is being constructed and is already in use in the BRICS group of states. China, the world's largest buyer of oil, is now paying for it in renminbi. The Chinese renminbi is on the rise, now making up 8.5% of global currency trade and gaining some foothold in Latin America, Africa and the Middle East, where, critically, Saudi Arabia did not renew the 50-year agreement with the US, made in 1974 to sell its oil in dollars, and has begun taking renminbi for oil sold to China. The significant factor here is that trades outside the dollar mean they do not go through US banks so they lose their cut and the US is less able to draw in value created by workers worldwide, as well as monitor trade and sanction countries who refuse to do its bidding. Hence the unanimity in the US ruling

class over China. Though they disagree on how to respond to this, both the Republicans and the Democrats agree on one thing, and that is China being the main challenge to US supremacy.

But Trump's MAGA movement is not only a break with past policies, Republican or Democrat. It is a veritable abandonment of the pillars of the "rules-based world order" that has been at the core of US imperialist policy since 1945, The fact that the US government is now quite openly declaring that the so-called international law and Geneva Conventions no longer apply to it, even though these agreements were the cornerstones of the post-war settlement, which it constructed and from which it was the main beneficiary, is a sign of real desperation. The post-war international role of the dollar was just one of these enormous benefits. The Trump MAGA camp now claims that these agreements allowed the rest of the world (including US allies) to "rip the US off," and hence they must all pay tribute.

However, Trump's economic threats have had the opposite effect. The upshot of his tariff war has been a decrease in confidence in the safety of the dollar. Foreign states are reducing their holding of US bonds. In 2020, 55% of US bonds were bought by foreign buyers but in 2025 this had decreased to 35%. The decrease in foreign buyers has caused the interest rate to rise which in turn is causing the financing of the enormous US debt (now $38 trillion) to become an even bigger problem as servicing it is now equal or greater than the entire US defence budget. The situation is becoming critical.

And where the US still has some significant advantage is on the military front. The diplomatic twists and turns of the Trump administration, no matter how irrational they may seem, have to be understood in the context of an empire attempting to retain control over a world slowly slipping from its grasp. An example is the US is pushing the burden of the war in Ukraine onto Europe. It has obliged its NATO allies to increase military spending to a target of 5% of GDP. It has forced allies like the EU, Japan and South Korea to promise to invest in strategic sectors of American industry. This being the price demanded for reducing Trump's tariffs on their exports to the US. The US hopes this will aid reindustrialisation. The promised funds, to be invested over a period of 10 years, amount to billions of dollars. Again this is a measure of weakness and desperation.

The US has stood firmly behind Israel's massacres in Gaza and creeping takeover of the West Bank as it aims to redraw the balance of power in the region. It continues to surround China with military bases while arming Taiwan. Far from retreating into the Western hemisphere, there is a policy of fighting tooth and nail to retain hegemony worldwide. Demands for the handing over of Greenland, the attacks on Venezuelan ships and boats all demonstrate that far from seeking "peace deals" the US is now embarked on an aggressive attempt to secure whatever resources it can get. Even the phony "ceasefire" deals in Ukraine or the Congo are about US acquisition of raw materials or the contracts for post-war reconstruction. And it goes beyond proxy wars, funding of guerilla wars, destabilisation, sanctions and tariffs. Now traditional US allies are not immune from

interference either. The so-called "Illiberal International" demands "free speech" (aka conspiracy theories) for the ultra-right "patriots" who toe the Trump line on migrants, Islamic terrorism and climate change. This is the soundtrack for the dying days of the "rules-based world order".

And those dying days are counted in blood. Ukraine, Palestine, Sudan. These conflicts have dominated the news for the last three years. Untold misery and horror, tens of thousands of dead, whole cities destroyed, and millions of lives changed forever. They are not accidents, but the direct consequence of a world divided into nation-states competing for influence, resources and land. And they are not the only flashpoints for future confrontations: Taiwan, Venezuela, Kashmir, are just some of the other powder kegs. Attempts to appeal to international law to end ongoing conflicts have revealed an ugly truth: imperialist interests, rather than any humanitarian concerns, determine when conflicts are allowed to start and end. Likewise, talk of a "green transition" is now on the backburner. Modern warfare emits massive amounts of greenhouse gas and pollution and still requires fossil fuels. A perfect storm of crises emerges, where economic, military and environmental emergencies are all feeding each other.

Nation or Class

In other words, humanity stands at a critical juncture. But humanity under capitalism is not one undifferentiated mass; within each nation-state is a society divided into two main social classes whose interests are fundamentally at odds. Those who labour for a wage, and those who employ labour for a profit. The working class whose unpaid labour is the source of the profits of the capitalist class. And the capitalist class which, with their urge to maintain profitability, is dragging all of humanity into a rat race to the bottom: a future of war, repression and austerity, where the rich get richer through the suffering of the poor. The question still remains whether the working class, that sleeping giant which everyday makes the world turn around, will let itself be dragged along silently.

It is no surprise that, seeing their world turned upside down and anxious about their own meagre livelihoods, instead of targeting their anger at the capitalist system, many have sought solace and safety in the nationalist myth, repeated as it is in schools and in the media. "We" – the citizens, the nation – "are all in it together". So say the politicians and the bosses. The "others" – migrants, refugees, LGBT communities, religious minorities, etc. – are "the enemy within". So say the far-right demagogues funded by the more Machiavellian elements of the capitalist class. This kind of nationalism, although purporting to be an alternative to the failures of the political parties of the establishment, in reality is a product of that same establishment, fuelled by the same drive to war. So it's no accident, or figment of the imagination, that this nationalist revival is being encouraged around the world, from the White House all the way down.

The situation in the UK is emblematic of wider trends. 50 years of economic restructuring and class defeats have undermined the very social fabric of working class communities. Values such as solidarity and collective action have been systematically undermined in favour

of atomisation and self-interest. Casual contracts, irregular hours of work, automation and digitalisation of workplaces, have all made it more difficult for workers to defend their economic interests, or even to recognise these interests as something they have in common. Benefits have been slashed and the NHS is at breaking point. And since the Conservative and Labour governments of recent decades have only delivered managed decline, it is all too easy for the far-right to step in with their false promises that life will get better if only the migrants were kicked out.

All of this divide and rule has had a drastic effect on the ability of workers to defend their wages and conditions. Even where strikes and protests take place, they do so on a sectoral and limited basis, and mostly end with the trade unions negotiating a return to work without any real gains. The end result is that 50 of the richest UK families now hold more wealth than 50% of the UK population. And almost 50% of UK workers are living pay cheque to pay cheque, many having to resort to food banks or holding down two jobs just to cover daily expenses. If workers blame each other for their misery, they are easier to exploit and ultimately to send off to war to fight each other for the interests of the rich.

Another World is Still Possible

Capitalism – a system premised on the existence of wage labour, private property and money exchange – has created the ultimate incentive: profit. Whether it is leaders of the world's foremost superpower allowing the destruction of an entire city in order to turn it into a riviera for the rich, fossil-fuel bosses continuing to wreck the planet's ecosystems despite all the scientific warnings, or online influencers generating racist AI content for clicks, they all have one thing in common: making money, consequences be damned. A social and economic system which rewards the undermining of our very existence as a species cannot be reformed. It has to be overthrown. But this can only be accomplished by the concerted action of the working class, the only force capable of carrying out a real social transformation from the bottom to the top.

And here, internationalists – those politicised elements within the working class who already understand the historical mission of their class in the struggle for a stateless, classless, moneyless society, a society where humans don't exploit and oppress each other for profit, but instead work together to fulfil our varied needs – have a special responsibility. Unlike all the other political tendencies, which only ask workers to vote, sign up and pay up, on the assumption that we should leave it to politicians to solve all our problems, internationalists have to tell the truth. The only salvation lies in workers' own activity, the strength of their organisation and solidarity which has to go beyond the trade union straitjacket and all individual identity divisions imposed by capitalism. This is no time for idle polemics, navel gazing or retreating to the ivory tower. Strikes and protests are happening around the world, but as our political ancestors have always said, without a revolutionary internationalist reference point these struggles will all inevitably exhaust themselves within the system.

We are not saying a Third World War is

going to break out tomorrow, nor that it will necessarily play out in the same way as the First and Second World Wars – rearmament takes time and we are dealing with much more advanced technologies and hybrid tactics. But it's undeniable the world is spiralling in that direction and while it's still possible, internationalists need to come together, and bring their alternative message to the wider working class, hopefully planting the seeds that can sprout a real movement for another world.

Communist Workers' Organisation
December 2025

No War but the Class War (NWBCW)



Interested? Get in touch!

The drive to war is out in the open. We want to work with other internationalists who can see the dangers for the working class if it does not get organised. This is why we have joined in with the initiative to develop committees at a local level across the world.

- *Against capitalism, imperialism and all nationalisms. No support for any national capitals, "lesser evils", or states in formation.*
- *For a society where states, wage-labour, private property, money and production for profit are replaced by a world of freely associated producers.*
- *Against the economic and political attacks that the current war, and the ones to come, will unleash on the working class.*
- *For the self-organised struggle of the working class, for the formation of independent strike committees, mass assemblies and workers' councils.*
- *Against oppression and exploitation, for the unity of the working class and the coming together of genuine internationalists.*

The American Ideology: Intersectionality Against the Working Class

The US has been the world's foremost superpower roughly since the Second World War, and although its status is being increasingly contested by an ascendent China, its supremacy remains intact for now. As such, ideological debates which divide the American ruling class continue to have wider implications on the rest of the world. One modern feature of this has been the identification of the "left" (i.e. Democrats) with "woke" and the "right" (i.e. Republicans) with "anti-woke" policies, cemented by Trump's declaration that with his return to power the US "will be woke no longer". As a multitude of reactionary commentators now celebrate the "death of woke", it bears repeating that the communist critique of identity politics in its various forms (including the most successful identity of all, nationalism), comes from a very different place. It is not about driving a wedge further between workers of different identities – something which only benefits the ruling class of both the left and the right – but of finding a way to overcome such divisions through class unity. Towards this end, so-called "woke" and "anti-woke" ideologies are both a barrier.

In this context, the integration of the concept of "intersectionality" into the milieu of the left and to some degree into wider social consciousness has had a particularly tenacious impact. Today even self-described socialist and anarchist groups have been forced to make it part of their framework. Like "feminism" itself, "intersectionality" has largely been reduced to a banality to enable its imposition as a moral imperative – in the case of feminism, if you're not a feminist, you must be a misogynist; in the case of intersectionality, if you don't subscribe to it, you must not care about the various plights of those experiencing intersecting oppressions. But in order to understand intersectionality, we must be clear on what it is we're referring to: the specific theory articulated within legal studies to express the way in which people can be oppressed on more than one basis (and so need more than one legal protection within bourgeois law). This of course has nothing to do with the political aims of those of us who want to do away with capitalist society altogether, yet to criticise it is to invite outrage and accusations of racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, ableism and so on. How did we get into this mess?

Stalinist Beginnings

The place to start is the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) in the 1930s and 40s, with the coinage of what's now known as the theory of "triple oppression" by influential black women members of the party, Louise Thompson Patterson and Claudia Jones. The idea that black women suffered "triply" from the oppressions of sex, race and class was not a new one, and can be traced back to the suffragist and abolitionist movements in mid-nineteenth century US, articulated most famously by Sojourner Truth (*Ain't I A Woman?*, 1851). The significance of Jones and Thompson Patterson's contributions nearly a century later is rather that of having set the

precedent for synthesising those ideas with Marxist-Leninist doctrine, to make the latter more palatable and more tenable in a Western context.

In the 1930s, the CPUSA had distinguished itself through its support for African Americans (in particular its declaration of support for the Scottsboro Boys in 1932), and consciously oriented its activity towards recruiting black members and organising black workers. To this end, Louise Thompson Patterson was assigned to intervene in struggles of black women workers like those of the Bronx Slave Market – domestic workers, predominantly black women, in a position of constant precarity. In her 1936 article on their situation, *Towards a Brighter Dawn*, Thompson Patterson described their situation as one of "triple exploitation" as women, workers and Negroes. Later, Jones' 1949 article, *An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman*, provided a longer, more thorough elaboration of the party's new orientation, which explicitly claimed that women had reached "new heights of equality" in the Soviet Union and in the newly-established People's Republic of China.

Their efforts then must be understood in their context as part of the CPUSA's effort to forge alliances with progressive liberal groups and to integrate black and female workers into its fold, in line with the Comintern's Popular Front policy (and as a continuation of this in the aftermath of the Comintern's dissolution and the Second World War). However genuine an attempt to correct its well-earned reputation for workerist machismo, it was in any case an opportunist move to make the party more appealing to people from those groups, and to claim that "socialism" (i.e. the state capitalist model of the USSR and its allies) trumped the liberal capitalist "democracy" of the West in its treatment of women and ethnic minorities. In reality, operating squarely within the laws of the capitalist order by this time after fifteen or so years of counter-revolution, the USSR's own policies on civil liberties fluctuated like those of any other capitalist state in harmony with the health of its own economy. Throughout the 1930s and 40s, the USSR carried out various policies that targeted, marginalised and even exterminated ethnic minorities such as Ukrainians, Poles and Jews. The same year that Thompson Patterson's article was published, the USSR criminalised abortion.

New Left: The Abandonment of the Working Class

By the time of the late 1960s to 1970s, the unprecedented boom of accumulation, which had been enabled by the destruction wreaked throughout the Second World War, began to slow; that is, profitability began to fall, and the world experienced another huge wave of social movements in which class struggle took the form of strikes and occupations, sometimes being linked to student movements and mass anti-war protests. Within the universities, a radical wing of academia flourished, which came to be known as the "New Left", led by thinkers like those of the Frankfurt School, particularly Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse's major contribution came in the pages of his *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), where he argued explicitly for the abandonment of the working class as the revolutionary subject, on the

grounds that it had become fully integrated into capitalism's domination, and so "traditional forms" of struggle to oppose capitalism were no longer applicable. According to Marcuse, struggle on a mass basis was no longer possible in the advanced capitalist centres because '"the people', previously the ferment of social change, have 'moved up' to become the ferment of social cohesion" (p.260). Instead, Marcuse argued that "the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and unemployable" are now the group in society whose interests are inherently opposed to those of the existing social order (p.143). With the slow decline in class struggle that was to follow from the second half of the 1970s, Marcuse had provided the perfect theoretical justification for the left to unmoor itself from class analysis.

Juggling Stalinism and Liberalism: The Birth of "Identity Politics"

By this time, activist groups like the Combahee River Collective (CRC) were explicitly claiming to synthesise "socialism" with Black feminism (itself a synthesis of the theories of the feminist and anti-racist movements) in their political perspectives. A smallish fringe group among a plethora at the time, the CRC are remembered today for their articulation of the concept of "identity politics" in their 1977 statement. In it, they write that "the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of [their] own identity", which they argue is "a particularly … revolutionary concept" for them as Black lesbians because of the particular extent and complexity of the oppressions they face. Though they describe themselves as "socialists" and write of the necessity of "the destruction of … capitalism and imperialism", they explicitly list class as one among "a whole range of oppressions" alongside race, sex and sexuality.

It's here too that we come to Angela Davis, who had spent the 1960s as a doctoral student of Marcuse and the 1970s travelling the world speaking on behalf of the CPUSA and the Black Panthers (an organisation founded explicitly on masculinist principles whose public volte face of 1969 saw them officially declare women members equal, but whose female members' accounts of their internal dynamics speak for themselves), declaring that Cuba was a country free of racism and praising the GDR and the USSR for denouncing racism. Davis then published *Women, Race and Class* (1981), which draws variously and confusedly on the work of other contemporary "Marxist feminists" (most notably James, Dalla Costa and Federici) as well as other feminists, anti-racists, Marxists and post-Marxists to synthesise the movements for the liberation of women, black people and the working class into one. And here too we find the claim that the USSR and its allies have paved the way for women's liberation, for example: "The only significant steps toward ending domestic slavery have in fact been taken in the existing socialist countries" (p.138).

Legal Studies: The Logical Terminus of the Journey

By the time we arrive at the term "intersectionality", coined by legal academic Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, we

arrive too at the logical conclusion of this shift away from revolutionary politics, completed in its reorientation towards the politics of liberal inclusion; of the assimilation of all people into capitalist society as citizens equal to each other in the opportunities they enjoy, with class just being one of the many reasons a person's opportunities might be unfairly limited. This was the stated aim of Crenshaw's work, which argued that existing anti-discrimination laws were limited to dealing with one axis of discrimination at a time. It should be obvious by this point that this has nothing to do with the aim of overthrowing capitalist society, and everything to do with the aim of perfecting it. Hence Crenshaw too writes of class alongside race and sex (and later sexuality, gender identity, physical ability and other such characteristics) as just another way in which one may be "privileged" or "oppressed". The previous year also saw Peggy McIntosh publish *White Privilege and Male Privilege* (abridged in 1989 as *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*), a landmark article in the field of women's studies which popularised (though did not invent) the idea that not experiencing a given form of oppression or discrimination constituted an "unearned asset".

This whistlestop timeline of the development of what was to become "intersectionality" is necessarily limited in its scope, and so inevitably certain key thinkers have been left out (Ida B Wells, Anna J Cooper, Elizabeth Flynn, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and more recent scholars like Patricia Hill Collins and Carole Boyce Davies, to name an infinitesimal few). This is not because their contributions to Black feminism weren't also significant, but because this article deals more specifically with the development of what we now call intersectionality and its insinuation into the framework of the wider left and activist milieus, and ripples into the milieus of revolutionary organisations too.

Fourth Wave Feminism and the Mess of Modern Activism

Given the various strands of reformism woven into its DNA, it makes perfect sense that intersectionality should be adopted as a guiding principle of activism; indeed, since the advent of Fourth Wave Feminism, something of a sine qua non. And it did so particularly through university campuses, where intersectionality became part of the curriculum, and something that student activists adopted as a result. This has then had a ripple effect on the wider scene of "the left", as Stalinist and Trotskyist groups have more or less critically welcomed intersectionality home as the scion of their shared theoretic ancestor. At the same time, it has wormed its way into anarchism ever since the tendency first started to become diluted by the New Left. Not only that, because of its bourgeois legal origins, and to some degree thanks to student activists finding employment in various bureaucratic roles, the language of intersectionality has been taken up by institutional political parties, trade unions, and even become part and parcel of workplace training, so those outside the university world are also exposed to it. All this in turn has meant that those of us in groups outside the official left-right divide, recognising the two poles as the two political wings of

capital, have nevertheless come across intersectionality in much the same way as we do feminism, anti-racism, and indeed anti-fascism – as something that we are expected to adopt into our framework or be condemned as pro-sexist, pro-racist, pro-fascist and so on.

And we similarly understand intersectionality as a framework that undermines class independence and rejects revolution in favour of minimising harm in the immediate term, which, as history has taught us time and again, implies an orientation towards the prolonging of the capitalist system, and thus the prolonging of the conditions which create the very oppressions it seeks to alleviate. So our framework for analysing and opposing oppression must have a different basis entirely.

The Marxist Understanding of Oppression

As Marxists, we never needed telling that the working class is made up of people of all genders, nationalities, abilities and so on; this is perfectly obvious to us, both in our capacity as analysts of class society, and as members of the working class within it. Nor, obviously, did Marx and Engels, nor Lenin and Luxemburg, need telling this back in their respective days when they formulated the theories of class struggle on which we base our political orientation. If the bourgeoisie's ways of dividing us against one another have changed, (mainly in that they have proliferated), the basic fact that they do this has not.

What's more, as Marxists we understand that these categories are more than labels assigned to us that we may choose whether to be ashamed or proud of; in each case they articulate oppressions which are the consequence of class society itself. Our analysis of class cannot therefore be relegated to any kind of equal footing with categories like gender, race, sexuality and so on because it is class society in the first place which has engendered them in every sense. Our understanding of sexual and racial oppression, for instance, is not that they are of any lesser importance than class oppression – a value judgement which has no place in materialist analysis – but that they are direct consequences of it, and therefore cannot be meaningfully combatted in any way which involves class compromise. That cross class struggles offer us nothing in the way of liberation is evident enough in the way that recent movements like Black Lives Matter and the Women's Marches, which originally arose with varying degrees of spontaneity in response to genuine concerns for black people and women respectively, have provided various opportunists with a springboard into careers in leftism, as well as a way for the political parties of the left of capital to re-establish control over popular anger.

And so as Marxists, we finally must expose the fundamental insolubility of these problems while class society remains intact. When we reject concessions to feminist, anti-racist, queer, etc., movements – and the same goes for the hybrid framework of intersectionality – we do so not out of a lack of concern for the people those movements posit as the subject of their politics, but precisely because we understand that the solutions capitalism's spectrum of ideological justifications has to offer us are no solutions at all. The best it can come up

with is equality of opportunity in its vast, all-consuming market, which for those of us that make up the class who have nothing to sell but our labour power, can only mean equality of exploitation. A bleak enough best-case scenario, we know moreover that in reality it is nothing but wishful thinking, because whatever the ruling class grants us in the way of breathing space, or "privileges" as it likes to brand such luxuries as access to healthcare, or the pleasure of not being targeted and harassed, it can just as easily take them away, as we inevitably see in times of crisis and war.

So however unevenly difficult our lives are made by our exploiters, it's clear we have nothing to gain from competing with each other over which of us has the worst time. On the other hand, we have everything to gain from recognising our common interest as a class and combining forces across our differences.

And if this has been central to the theory of our political forebears, history has at key moments proven them correct, as various particular sections of our class - women, migrant workers, slave labourers – have recognised this in practice. It would be remiss not to recall here the example of the February Revolution of 1917, when working class women in Russia took the lead, not in a sectional or separatist struggle, but one that reached out to their brothers, husbands, fathers, and sons as their class fellows, in the bosses' factories and the Tsar's conscript army. They recognised through instinct what the revolutionary parties articulated – that the movement of our class must be a mass one, and so for any hope of success must look for ways to spread, and ultimately to generalise across divisions imposed by the system.

Liberation from Identity: Workers of all Nations, Genders, Races, Sexualities, Abilities, etc. etc. etc… Unite!

It's in this sense that we understand class as the fundamental dividing line in capitalist society, and it's in this sense that we see the working class as the revolutionary subject – with our endless kaleidoscope of differences – holding the key to a future society. Not because we take home the gold medal in the bourgeoisie's tiresome oppression olympics, but because we are the class of people whose position within society – that of producing all the goods and providing all the services from which all profit is derived – grants us the power to bring capitalism and the class which rules it to their knees.

To be able to do this, we need to refuse to play their games; to reject the categorisations they impose on us, and to see through the solutions on offer from their progressive factions as no more nor less than utopian attempts to fix their system, to maintain their class rule. They are welcome to their more or less minute tweaks in their sisyphean effort to perfect their society as its core continues to rot; our aim is a different one entirely.

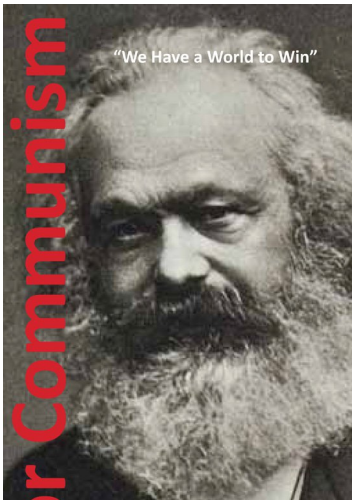
So we oppose racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and all other oppression without compromise, in the only way it's possible to meaningfully do so – not with class collaboration, but with working class unity oriented towards an independent, self-organised, mass class struggle, to challenge capitalism and ultimately to overthrow it entirely, and in its stead build a new society of freely

associated producers, wherein the free development of each will be the precondition for the free development of all. This future society, which we call communism, obviously has no more in common with the state capitalist leviathans defended by the various Stalinists and Trotskyists mentioned above than it does with the equally capitalist "democracies" of the West; instead, this future society will be one wherein states, money, and classes themselves will appear only in our history books. The task of creating this society may be a mammoth one, but it is one of which we, and only we, the working class across the whole world, are capable.

Tinkotka
Communist Workers' Organisation
August 2025

Notes:

For our previous articles on identity politics, see e.g. *Workers of all Identities, Unite!* (https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2018-10-26/mistaken-identity-review) and *Adventures in the Culture Wars: A Review Article* (https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2025-08-26/adventures-in-the-culture-wars-a-review-article)



For Communism

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Wages, Employment, and the Out-of-Tune Trumpets of the Bourgeoisie

We publish here a translation from our comrades in Battaglia Comunista on the condition of the working class in Italy. Much of it will make for familiar reading to workers beyond Italy as well.

Introduction

The following article is an update of a previous piece published in *Prometeo* no. 28 in 2022.[1] Prime Minister Meloni's statements on the eve of May Day prompted us to "reopen the matter." Not that Meloni's self-promoting message was any different from what she's been saying for about two years: i.e. the usual shameless picture of a reality that doesn't exist, apart from the barrage of bullshit blasted from television and cell phone screens. Not only does the "Promised Land" promoted by the Prime Minister not appear on the radar of the working class, but, on the contrary, it seems further away than ever.

This article mainly refers to data from the end of March, but figures released around 1 May only confirm, if not worsen, the gloomy picture facing the proletariat. One figure, amongst many, is the tax burden on pay slips, which once again belies what the "sovereignist" government is touting as one of its greatest achievements for the working class: the supposed lowering of tax deductions (see below). The OECD itself, that "Bible" for both the capitalist right and left, says so:

> *"In 2024, according to the OECD "Taxing Wages 2025" report, the burden of employment taxes for a single worker increased by 1.61 percentage points, reaching 47.1% of labour costs and remaining well above the OECD average (34.9%). The Italian one is the most significant increase among the OECD countries. Italy is in fourth place for the size of the wedge, that is, the difference between the cost of labour borne by the employer [entrepreneur, we say...] and the net income received by the worker."*[2]

The reason for this apparent incongruity with the government's toxic propaganda is easily explained: the (meagre) contractual increases resulting from the renewal of a portion of employment contracts triggered the higher tax rate, so that what is given with one hand is taken back with the other — by the state, the supreme defender of the interests of the employers and the bourgeoisie. Not bad for a government friendly to the working class. …

Employment: Propaganda Versus Reality

On 1 April, ISTAT[3] published an update on employment trends in Italy. The unemployment rate had fallen to 5.9% in February, the lowest since 2007, when it was 5.8%. Furthermore, there were 567,000 more people employed compared to the same month in 2024, bringing the employment rate to 63%. The only discordant note concerned the inactive population, which, with a 0.3% increase, had reached 32.9%. As is well known, "inactive people" are defined as those who, despite not having a job or studying, are no longer looking for work because

they have been discouraged from doing so.

Overall, then, this appears to be yet another medal that the wonder government can pin on its chest, except that other data released a few days earlier mean the medal risks resembling an April Fool's joke against the working class. Indeed, in the last week of March, first the ILO and then ISTAT released two documents that promptly deflate the government's vulgarity.

Let's start with the second, the ISTAT report (Living Conditions and Household Income), which, in essence, says nothing new or sensational, but rather confirms a long-running trend that is gradually affecting millions of working class people who are seeing their living conditions getting worse. The numbers show that in 2024, 13,525 million individuals were at risk of poverty (in addition to the nearly six million who survive in absolute poverty), that is, 23.1% of the population, compared to 22.8% in 2023. They are at risk of social exclusion—as the cold statistical language records banally—since, quite simply, even if they work, they struggle to make ends meet (even when they do so without going into debt), because wages are low, often not even remotely enough to get by week after week, even when they do abide by the clauses of national contracts. The private security contract, signed—it goes without saying—by the unions, is a notorious one, providing for an hourly wage well below the €9 per hour threshold indicated as a viable minimum wage. But even if you work in a sector that offers higher hourly wages, you can be very close to poverty if the job is then trapped in the many forms of legal or illegal precarious work. This kind of noose tightens the necks of millions of workers, predominantly women, young people, and immigrants.

It's no accident that they are the most disadvantaged (i.e., crushed) segments of the working class, a fact that any survey on employment, wherever it comes from, regularly records. In short, employment is the highest since the turn of the century—as the prime minister said, with her usual disdain for ridicule—but these are generally "shit jobs," to use the colloquial term: very low pay, insecure, where the say-so of the bosses knows no limits.

Furthermore, and once again, the "spectacular" increase in employment isn't due to Meloni's miraculous powers, but is part of another international trend, certainly European, that has accelerated for at least a decade. In 2014, unemployment in the Eurozone was 12%, ten years later it was 6.5%, which means, according to the institute that provided the data, 20 million more jobs. So, all good? It depends on how you look at it. From the standpoint of the bosses, both "public" and private, yes, but from that of the working class, certainly less so. In fact, what matters is not the quantity, but the quality of employment, which is generally inversely proportional to the former. The more "aware" bourgeoisie, let's say, or those without electoral interests to protect, note this, also because it's there for all to see: "Europe has moved toward a slightly more American model, where everyone has a job, but a rotten job." This "rotten" employment is characterised by precariousness and low wages, both hourly and monthly, due to the forced reduction in overall working hours:

> *"'Minijobs' in Germany, flexible-hour contracts, workers on home delivery*

> *platforms (Deliveroo, Uber Eats, etc.)... Everywhere in the Old Continent, labour market reforms have multiplied, with the aim of simplifying layoffs [the Jobs Act is therefore not an Italian prerogative], reducing support for the unemployed, and easing the obligations of employers.*"[4]

The Italian labour market and the political pressures that govern it are no exception to this picture. This is to be expected, given that both are the result of the logic of capital and, today, of its decades-long structural crisis. In short, it's the bourgeois application of an old slogan of the labour movement, mostly in a radical-reformist vein: "Less work, work for all." Beyond the bitter aftertaste of the joke, it's not surprising that this forced reduction in hours worked is accompanied by the growing phenomenon of double or even third jobs in Europe—just like in the US — in order to earn a living wage. In short, to reiterate once again, the higher rate of employment is brought about precisely by compressing wages and worsening working conditions, that is, by exacerbating exploitation, all to the detriment of reformist illusions.

Furthermore, there is another important aspect that helps explain the increase in employment, and it is another indicator of the difficulties capital has been struggling with for over half a century. This is the so-called "demographic winter", i.e., the progressive decline in births over the past few decades, alongside the ageing of the population. They are two sides of the same coin, perhaps most pronounced in Italy,[5] but a phenomenon present in all regions of so-called advanced capitalism.

Amalgamating the "demographic winter" and the falling rate of profit—the root of the difficulties—may seem like an ideological stretch, but upon closer examination, the relationship emerges more clearly. Beyond the undoubted "cultural" changes of recent decades, the declining birth rate is closely linked both to the progressive reduction of social services—the depredation of indirect wages—and to rising job insecurity with the resulting low, if not very low, wages, as noted above. (Although low wages are not a prerogative of the precarious.) Women are especially hit by involuntary part-time work, something which obviously negatively impacts on the possibility of establishing the minimum conditions for "starting a family", as they used to say.

Apart from being self-evident, there are numerous "official" academic studies to demonstrate how the crisis of the accumulation process is an obstacle to the reproduction of the labour force itself.

The long quotation which follows describes the dilemma many couples find themselves in, often even when both are working:

> *"The income of a working couple with a one-year-old child may not be sufficient to cover the costs of housing, food, transport, and daycare. This is called the two-income trap[6] and is increasingly common [...] for low-income families where both parents are employed, and particularly in the middle bracket, costs have grown faster than overall family income since the late 1970s. In other words, workers' purchasing power has decreased.*"[7]

In many cases various forms of welfare assistance for families are fundamental but, it goes without saying, they are not

enough to counteract the capitalists' decades-long attack on the proletariat, an attack so intense as to cause a collapse in the birth rate. It is precisely the bourgeoisie, agent of capital, that opposes life from this perspective as well. To give another example, it is notorious that entrepreneurs (bosses), before hiring a woman, often intimidate her by asking whether she intends to have children, or have her sign a blank resignation form, so they can fire her without bureaucratic hassles if she becomes pregnant.

Yet even more than the "demographic winter", although real, there is another element that explains the increase in employment in Italy: it is due almost exclusively to the over-fifties and sixties being forced to keep working because the various pension reforms have chained more and more people to the "oar" of the employers' galleys (not least, those of the public sector). To give some numbers: "In February, the number of employed people increased by 47,000 compared to January and reached a new record of 24,332 million, while on an annual basis growth is 2.4%, equal to +567,000 new jobs." But the "567,000 increase in employed people compared to January is due to +542,000 of people over 50 and 52,000 more young people between 15 and 24 years old being employed. The core working age groups are decreasing by 17 thousand employed people (35-49 years) and 10 thousand employed people (25-34 years) respectively. [...] Furthermore [...] on an annual basis, female employment is growing at almost double the rate (+3.1%) of male employment (+1.8%), even if the rate of 54.2% remains approximately 13 points below the European average rate".[8] The ineffable Minister of Transport, whose mere mention makes us feel sick, has built his dismal political career on the promise of abolishing the worst—but in line with previous—pension reforms. Meanwhile, needless to say, the dismantling of the "Fornero" law[9] has disappeared without a trace, and indeed, there's a real risk that the retirement age will rise further.

Finally, what about the abolition of the so-called citizens' income, which eliminated income support, however meagre, for 800,000 individuals/family units?

"Conflicting" Statistics do not Erase the Underlying Data

The ILO document on world wages[10] almost seems to have set the table for the ISTAT document, because here too, the wage picture in Italy clashes with the triumphalist grin shamelessly displayed—obviously—by those who today are sitting their honourable behinds on the benches of the majority, even though they have done nothing but pick up the baton from their predecessors.

According to the ILO, between 2008 and 2024, wages in Italy fell by 8.7% (the worst figure), compared, it is said, to a 5% increase in France and 15% in Germany. Specifically, after the sharp decline between 2009 and 2012, following the subprime crisis, wages are shown to have fallen by 3.3% in 2022 and 3.2% in 2023. Only in 2024 an increase of 2.3% was recorded, but it was insufficient to recover the losses of previous years. Therefore, assuming these data are correct, the so-called tax contribution cut (originally initiated by Draghi) hasn't even served to halt the decline in wages, thus revealing itself for what it is: a "little help," yes, but for employers, who avoid spending that

(little) money to increase wages. Growth in 2024 cannot be explained by the "cut," but is due to other reasons. The first is that many contracts have been renewed due to their being "affordable", i.e. compatible with profitability—albeit with considerable delay, while over 50% of the workforce (approximately seven million people) are still waiting for renewal. Incidentally, one might almost say that if the government's proposed increase for public sector employees is 6%, it would be better not to bother negotiating: at least it would avoid being held captive by a government that is so concerned for the working class!

The other equally important element, perhaps even more so, is the drop in inflation, which in the two-year period 2022-23 had exceeded 17% (certain data show almost 20%); but in the end, the impact on pay cheques has been more severe, given that the IPCA index on which salary increases are calculated excludes the price of fuel, gas, and electricity, expenses that are far from insignificant, as everyone knows. Therefore, the Italian working class (immigrants included, obviously) seem to have suffered the greatest loss, while in other countries, as already mentioned, wages appear to have actually increased. A golden opportunity for radical reformism to accuse the Italian ruling class—that is, the bourgeoisie and its ravenous, charlatan political personnel—of particular pettiness compared to their foreign counterparts. We certainly don't deny that the attack on wages has been severe, even particularly severe, but we're not entirely convinced by the increase that other segments of the global working class appear to have benefited from. While there undoubtedly exist specificities in different geographical areas, the capitalist system dominates the entire world, as does its decades-long crisis. It is precisely this crisis that forces the "national" branches of the global bourgeoisie to adopt the same strategy toward the proletariat and if in certain parts of the world wages have increased—having started from a very low, if not minimal, levels—in others, particularly in the "centre," they have gone in the opposite direction. In this article, we will not delve into the reasons for this phenomenon and refer to our publications. Here, it is sufficient to recall that, since the late 1970s, the share of wages in global GDP has been steadily declining, while, conversely, that of profits has risen, thus confirming that lower wages are the most immediate and effective factor counteracting the decline in the average rate of profit. Some data confirming this trend are already presented in the Prometeo article cited in the introduction. Here, to confirm that nothing has changed —nor could it—we refer to two graphs[11] drawn by an ECB economist (Isabel Schnabel), which show, once again, how the share of wages in GDP is steadily declining, while that of profits follows the opposite trend. Furthermore, the decline in the "wage share" is paralleled by that of "union density," that is, the progressive decline in union membership and strikes. The graph is accompanied by the observation, in some ways correct, that given the union's loss of strength, wages cannot help but decline.

We should add, however, that the crisis of capital, which has pushed the employers to attack the working class head-on has indeed reduced the weight of the unions as a result of the dramatic upheaval and, in

the West, dispersal of large concentrations of workers which has changed the composition of the working class. Nevertheless the unions are still a valuable ally for the bosses, as in the past. Indeed, the unions have largely supported the bourgeois offensive, paralysing or limiting a true "worker" response (in the broadest sense), so as not to compromise "social cohesion" — that is, social peace founded on the subjugation of the proletariat and "the country's economy," that is, capital. Thus the "mystery" of the OECD's rising wages statistics from late 2022 remains. At the time "industrial" disputes which are difficult to define as class-based, except with a thousand distinctions, accompanied the crescendo of the employers' and their state's offensive. Bosses as benefactors? For themselves, certainly, and indeed international statistics include executives and managers up to the highest levels among "employees", whose stratospheric "compensation" masks the decline of wages, without which it would appear, as indeed it is, even more to the sole advantage of capital and its officials.

We do need to understand precisely what the methodological criteria for these surveys are, because they risk generating confusion rather than clarity. Let's return to the ILO document, whose language is somewhat perplexing. For example, the introduction states that there is "growth in real wages globally starting in 2022 [but] real wages in many countries have not yet recovered the loss of purchasing power caused by the cost-of-living crisis." Immediately this raises the question: "There may be growth, but what kind of real growth is it if it hasn't recovered what was previously lost?" Banal considerations? Perhaps, but it's like rejoicing at a beautiful funeral.

This isn't the only data that raises some questions, however, as page 14 claims that "With less than 1% of employees classified as low-wage earners, Italy is one of the countries with the least wage inequality." This is a bold statement, given that other academic and, it goes without saying, reformist research provides quite different figures. A digression before continuing: by "low-wage" earners, some research institutes mean "those with an income below 60% of the national median (net of social transfers)"[(12)] and according to Eurostat, in Italy this figure is "9%, up from 8.7% recorded in 2023."[(13)] For the ILO, however, on page 15, the definition refers to "those earning less than 50% of the median hourly wage." This indication of hourly wages is important because it provides a specific reference, by contrast with surveys that record the increase in the wage share/mass, without specifying whether this is due to an increase in hours worked or numbers employed (even if low-wage and reduced-time). In the latter case, there could be an increase in the wage mass even in the presence of low wages, below the value of the workforce. That said, even the Eurostat data (as well as the ILO) does not seem to agree with another joint study on "Work and Wages in Italy", according to which the percentage of poor workers is higher and, unsurprisingly, has "a strong gender connotation: the percentage of low-wage female workers (19.2%) is almost double that of men (10.5%)."[(14)] The greater prevalence of low wages among the female workforce—a historic strength of capital, which uses forms of oppression with millennia-old roots to its advantage —adds another piece to the puzzle of

employment growth boasted by the prime minister. This growth affects, in percentage terms, men more than women, which brings us back to the "strange" considerations of the ILO report. On page 15, the ILO report correctly identifies the wage disparity affecting women: "Almost 52% of low-wage workers are women. In Italy, female workers represent 43.2% of all employed workers. This proportion rises to 51.9% among low-wage employees." So far, so good (so to speak), but then the document states that "among high-income countries, the overrepresentation of female workers at the lower end of the wage distribution is more modest in Italy than the average for countries in this group, which is estimated at 55.9%." After saying that this "overrepresentation" affects every country in the world (a well-known fact), on page 16 it says: "The gender wage gap in Italy is 9.3%, one of the lowest among European Union countries," where it stands at 14.3%. Now, once again, it is natural to point out the discrepancy with other data (INPS 2022) which show that there is a difference of €7,300 between the average annual salary of men and women (€24,500 against €17,300) that is, approximately 30%, which is obviously reflected in "pension benefits, which are on average 36% lower".(15)

Amid this jungle of data, the underlying fact, declared or not, remains that the so-called wage growth, boasted about by various politicians, does not recover what has been lost in the last three or four years. At best, wages—or rather, the proletariat—must chase the cost of living. Most of the time they must fight a rearguard battle that at least tries to limit the damage. According to the OECD, at the end of 2024 wages in Italy were 7.2% lower than in the first four months of 2021; but in the Czech Republic they were at -11.8% and in Sweden at -8.6%.(16) In the same period the Eurozone as a whole recorded -4% and the "average among the 38 countries of the organization registers -0.6%".(17)

If Athens cries, Sparta doesn't laugh, and if we include Germany in "Sparta," according to other research institutes, the situation bears little resemblance to the +15% reported by the ILO.

In an article published on his blog on 22 February, economist Michael Roberts describes the state of affairs as follows:

> *"Real wages in Germany remain below pre-pandemic levels. A quarter of Germans have incomes that are insufficient to make ends meet, according to the German Economic Institute ... The demise of the German economy has exposed the underlying issue of a 'dual labour' market with a whole layer of part-time temporary employees for German businesses on very low wages. About one-quarter of the German workforce now receive a 'low income' wage, using a common definition of one that is less than two-thirds of the median, which is a higher proportion than in all 17 [maybe 27?, ed.] European countries, except Lithuania."*(18)

What is there to say, except that it sounds like ISTAT's report from the end of March?

The factor that has worsened the conditions of the proletariat in Italy, Germany, and elsewhere is inflation, magnified by speculation. Now, in addition to this there is a war economy that is aggravating the decades-long attack

unleashed by the bosses against wage workers which, as an OECD economist modestly acknowledges, are showing "a responsible attitude in pay demands."[19] In other words: the usual defeatist and complicit policy of trade unionism towards the capitalist system, also known as "the good of the country."

Hoping that the unions will pull the class out of the difficult situation that surfaces from bourgeois studies and, above all, that it experiences daily, is like asking for help from the carter who is taking us to the gallows.

CB
Battaglia Comunista
16 May 2025

Notes:

(1) https://www.leftcom.org/it/articles/2022-11-02/trilussa-teorico-della-borghesia-su-certe-statistiche-relative-ai-salari-e-sul

(2) Claudio Tucci, Perché i salari in Italia restano bassi? Inflazione, cuneo fiscale e produttività, Il Sole 24 ore+, 2 maggio 2025.

(3) Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (National Institute of Statistics)

(4) En Europe, le grand chambouement du marché du travail, https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2024/05/04/en-europe-le-grand-chamboulement-du-marche-du-travail_6231516_3234.html

(5) "between 2013 and 2023 ... in the 15-34 age group [...] the total number of young people went from 12.9 to 12 million (-927 thousand) and the number of adults between 35 and 49 years old fell by 2.6 million (from 14.2 to 11.6 million). But in the same period, the number of adults over 50 increased by 1.9 million, from 11.8 to 13.7 million. In this age group, there are more permanent contracts", Giorgio Pogliotti, Lavoro, stanno davvero aumentando i posti stabili in Italia?, Il Sole 24 ore+, 14 March 2025

(6) If both parents work and don't have support from their grandparents, they can't care for the child, so one of them, usually the woman, is forced to quit her job or they have to pay someone else to care for the child. In any case, the family income is significantly reduced..

(7) Marianna Filandri, Lavorare non basta, Laterza, 2022, p. 29. On page 30, she continues by saying that, "In 2020, according to ISTAT, the presence of a minor in the [family] nucleus increased the probability of being in absolute poverty from 7.7 to 11.5%".

(8) Giorgio Pogliotti, Lavoro, l'occupazione in Italia cresce grazie agli over 50: ecco perché, Il Sole 24 ore+, 2 April 2025

(9) The 2012 law, named after Elsa Fornero, then Minister of Labour, shifted workers to a defined contribution scheme, stopped indexing pensions above a certain income level for inflation and increased the retirement age to 67. The aim was to raise cash and reassure markets of the commitment to spending discipline in the eurozone's third-largest economy. All worsened the conditions of workers in relation to capital.

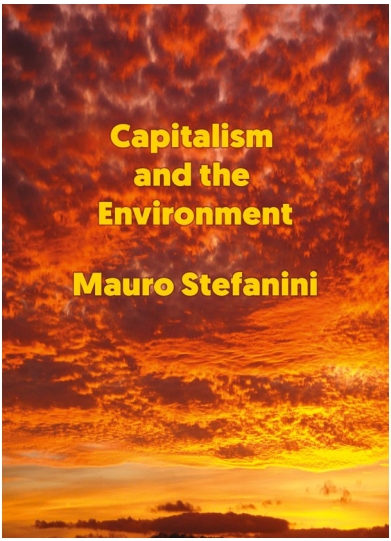
(10) Global Wage Report 2024-25: Is wage inequality decreasing globally?, https://www.ilo.org/publications/flagship-reports/global-wage-report-2024-25-wage-inequality-decreasing-globally For statistics on Italy, Le tendenze dei salari e delle disuguaglianze salariali in Italia e nel mondo, https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/

rapporto_mondiale_sui_salari_2024_nota_italia.pdf
(11) https://x.com/Isabel_Schnabel/status/1576220235950329857
(12) Patrizia Pallara, Poveri pur lavorando: lo dice Eurostat, https://www.collettiva.it/copertine/economia/poveri-pur-lavorando-lo-dice-leurostat-xxn53cf6, 28 April 2025.
(13) Pallara, loc. cit.
(14) Rinaldo Evangelista e Lia Pacelli, Lavoro e salari in Italia, in Menabò n. 236, April 2025.
(15) Esmeralda Rizzi, Gender pay gap: una discriminazione che non si ferma, https://www.collettiva.it/copertine/diritti/gender-pay-gap-discriminazione-rlm1t7j2, 15 February 2025.
(16) Giorgio Pogliotti, Stipendi reali, com'è messa l'Italia rispetto agli altri paesi europei?, Il Sole 24 ore+, 27 March 2025
(17) Il Sole 24 ore+, loc cit
(18) https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2025/02/22/germany-drained-of-power-der-kraft-beraubt/
(19) Il Sole 24 ore+, loc cit.

Capitalism and the Environment
Mauro Stefanini

Our late comrade Mauro Stefanini was one of the first to recognise the dangers of global warming and all the more immediate consequences of the environmental devastation created by modern capitalism. He eventually put these into articles published originally in 1994. We have translated and reprinted them here in a new edition which also includes a list of our main publications on this issue up to 2021.

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Review of *Their Wars – Our Dead*! Anarchist Reflections on Anti-Militarism

Alex Alder and Bill Beech (eds.), Their Wars – Our Dead: Anarchist Reflections on Anti-Militarism (2025, PM Press), https://pmpress.org.uk/product/their-wars-our-dead/

Since the war in Ukraine, the anarchist movement in the UK and elsewhere has split on the question of internationalism. The authors of this book are in the internationalist camp and have published it in order to make their views known. As internationalists, we welcome this effort by our comrades. The authors state they do not wish to simply rehash the debates of the last three years but want "to reflect on the place of anarchism in anti-militarism historically, and at present moment" (p.6) and seek "to learn from the past in order to figure out a revolutionary yet realistic course of anarchist anti-militarism today". (p.25)

The six authors are based in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and England. They have been or continue to be members of organisations such as the Anarchist Communist Group (ACG), Solidarity Federation (SolFed), Organise!, or the AnarCom Network (ACN). Some of them are known to us and have participated in the No War but the Class War (NWBCW) initiative.(1)

The authors of the introduction, Alex Alder and Bill Beech, summarise how, following the war in Ukraine, anarchists in Great Britain caught war fever.(2) That so many anarchists succumbed to warmongering is due to the weakness of both the anarchist current and the workers' movement in general. Some pro-war anarchists acknowledge this weakness and in fact use it as an argument in favour of compromising with the ruling class. Some anarchists' enthusiasm for Corbynism is also seen as a precursor to the falling in line with warmongering.(3) It should be noted this is also found outside the UK, with anarchists backing Mélenchon's party in France for example.

The authors are critical of national defence and national liberation movements because "whenever the lower classes have taken up the model of nationalism for their own liberation, their success has only yielded another regime of oppression and exploitation, new rounds of war and genocide, all the while excluding peoples within their territory, forging 'oppressed nations' ready to repeat the cycle". (p.22)

The introduction examines the causes of the war in Ukraine. They claim, as we do, that the war is an inter-imperialist conflict. However, they reject Marxists arguing "for the primacy of economic forces in the origins of the war". They portray Marxists as "detectives" identifying "the 'falling rate of profit' of Russian capital or some other deep crisis of Russian capitalism" as the cause of the war. This is a caricature of the Marxist explanation of imperialism.(4) Further, capitalism is a global system and an inter-imperialist war could not be explained by a crisis concerning only one side. The authors recognise that crisis fuels "nationalist authoritarianism, imperialist bloc retrenchment, and a normalisation of war", (p.33) that

Ukraine's land, whether for agriculture or mining, is a worthy prize, that "in part, war is certainly waged to secure markets and interests of capital, which is international", (p.26) and explain that Russian capitalists would rather Ukrainian enterprises remain in their orbit than be sold off to Western capitalists but ultimately believe that "the notion that the relatively comfortable and very lucrative relationship of Western capital with the Russian one (epitomised in the Nord Stream pipelines) was to be thrown away for the sake of a risky Russian imperialist escapade is not credible". (p.27) By this logic, international trade would always be antithetical to imperialism.

NATO expansion into Ukraine is seen as a better explanation. We would argue that these sorts of geopolitical manoeuvres ultimately have economic causes. Similarly, another cause given is the rise of BRICS (decorrelated from economic forces?). The cause of wars in general is considered to be the "military apparatus directed by the state". (p.23) But what pushes the state to act this way?

The concept of "militarism" plays a key role in their understanding of war. They define militarism as "the collapse of social, political and economic values into military ones, the drive to war, and the prevailing notion that safety comes through armament and military readiness". (p.7) Militarism is "inherent to the state and, in its modern form, essential to capitalism". (p.34-35) Aside from "repressive institutions, militarism is materialised in a military-industrial-scientific complex of research, development, production, marketing and trading". It "takes different forms depending on the political, economic, and historical context of its development". (p.36) In Western countries, it takes the form of "liberal militarism", which uses the façade of international law, humanitarian intervention, democracy, global security, to conceal its aims. They explain militarism, no matter its form, "suffuses our societies from top (standing armies and arms industries) to bottom (values and subjectivities reproduced in everyday life). But when a particular nation is plunged into war, especially total war that engulfs all of society, it is a moment of exception and profound crisis". (p.15) This crisis is a double-edged sword, which can serve to further the interests of the ruling class but also may invite revolt. Militarism and patriarchal gender roles mutually reinforce each other. They explain militarism is found in all class societies and is maintained by "manly discipline" and "patriotism". They later explain nationalism (and patriotism) as a product of bourgeois society specifically. (p.19-21) Today, social media is an instrument of militarism, with its "instant and pervasive claims to displays of loyalty and conformity, coupled with the rule by fear of cancellation and shunning". (p.8) Apparently, then, the state and militarism are the prime causes of war. This idealist approach blames war for war, having explained nothing. The state and "militarism" may form a framework allowing war to happen but alone do not cause this or that war. Not all chapters seem to follow this approach.

Nonetheless, we agree that "a revolutionary movement capable of thwarting war in the short term and ultimately changing society altogether is a movement of the working class as a

whole, not the conspiracy of a politically active minority". (p.40) The anarchists remind us that they are against this latter conception of a "revolutionary dictatorship", instead aiming "for the oppressed and exploited masses to emancipate themselves through their self-organised direct action. In this we participate, as part of this class ourselves, leading by example and sharing our ideas". (p.24) For us, this self-organisation of the class against its oppressors is none other than the dictatorship of the proletariat and this leadership of part of the class sounds similar to our conception of the role of the party. They agree with us that war in Ukraine is not an isolated incident and that there is a trend towards a generalised war, understood as a conflict between imperialist blocs. This is also why they urge anarchists to rediscover anti-militarism.

The first chapter, by Declan McCormick, provides a brief overview of internationalist anarchist opposition to militarism and war since the First World War. McCormick argues that anarchists have historically taken the position of revolutionary defeatism, with the notable exception of some figures like Kropotkin during the First World War.

By the Second World War, the anarchist movement was weaker. In France, where it still had some strength, some joined the official Resistance groups but most rejected their nationalist nature. In the UK, the movement was smaller but likewise refused to take sides, as exemplified by the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation (APCF) and the United Socialist Movement (USM), influenced by both anarchism and council communism. This is the subject of the last chapter.

Later, anarchists in the UK opposed the US's invasion of Vietnam without supporting the Stalinist regime of Ho Chi Minh. They did not support either the UK or Argentina in the Falklands War. Anarchists in Argentina did not support the generals that had tortured and killed them either. They did not "support one group of nationalist gangsters against another during the slaughter" that followed the collapse of Yugoslavia. (p.52)

That the war in Ukraine broke this trend is therefore surprising. The author believes that lack of understanding of what imperialism is, commitment to the ideology of anti-fascism, lack of class analysis, and identity politics are what allowed this to happen. Oddly, neither the introduction nor this chapter mention the recent support within the anarchist movement for states in formation like Rojava as paving the way for current pro-war anarchists.[5]

The second chapter, by Andrew Żywności, looks at conscription in Ukraine, Russia, and Israel. Professional armies cost less and volunteer soldiers are less ideologically volatile than conscripts. So why use conscription? "To tie the masses to the long-term stability of the state". (p.64) Hence the national service in place in countries across the world. But this is different to conscription during an active war. Russia and Ukraine employ conscription also because of a need for bodies. Żywności reasons that the lack of working-class opposition to the war in Russia stems from the health of the economy:

> *"When the invasion started there was opposition to the war from within*

> *Russia, though it had not formed a cohesive working-class movement. This is no doubt also due to the booming economy which is seen as a reward of the war's successes and the state's ability to render the US/EU sanctions completely ineffective. The World Bank has consistently upgraded Russia's GDP PPP, and it was most recently classed as the world's 4th largest economy."* (p.66-67)

Nonetheless, many have fled conscription. However, "it is easier for the upper and middle classes to leave". (p.67) The state also uses convicts. The deal is the same as with conscription: the army or prison. Convicts are brutally kept in line, as exemplified by the murder of Yevgeny Nuzhin. The lack of serious opposition to conscription is thus also due to the Russian state's ruthless repression, though a few organisations like the Anarchist Black Cross have provided support for anti-war activists.

Ukraine also uses conscription and convicts. The upper age limit of conscripts is 60 and the average age of conscripts was 43-45 in February 2024, despite criticisms from some of the military on the efficacy of those conscripted. The disabled are next. Again, the wealthier you are the easier it is to dodge conscription, notably by bribing recruitment officers. Those who stay hidden in their homes can often work from home. Despite the treacherous route, tens of thousands have left the country. Desertion from training posts is common. State repression against deserters has increased since 2024.

The purpose of conscription in Israel is a lot more ideological as Israel does not have a desperate need for bodies, as shown for example by the fact that Palestinian Israelis are not conscripted. Israel has a long history of draft dodgers but motivations vary widely: pacifism, anti-Zionism, pro-Zionism, religion, anti-war sentiments. Żywności explains that "the role of internationalists is not to pick and choose sides, our side is the working class and we should not countenance states coercing our brothers and sisters into fighting one another". He further explains that "states require bodies for their war machines, and capitalism requires state power to defend wealth hoarded through exploitation. Nationalism keeps us cheering on the state's war machine and ignorant to the exploitation of capitalism." (p.81-82)

In the third chapter, Jason Brannigan examines the relationship between anarchism and militarism in Ireland during the Troubles. He first gives a brief history of pre-partition Ireland and its class struggles. He then explains that "the development of Irish Unionism and Nationalism as recognisably modern ideologies coincided with the development of capitalism and the emergence of the organised working-class. Partition copper-fastened divisions in the labour movement". (p.87) The working class in Northern Ireland could occasionally unite across the divide, as shown by the Outdoor Relief strike of 1932.

The first meeting of the Belfast Anarchist Group (BAG) took place at the same time as the Derry Housing Action Committee's historic march on 5 October 1968 (few attended as a result). Anarchism as a political movement was thus born in Northern Ireland alongside the Civil Rights movement. The latter were primarily inspired by the movement in the

US while the anarchists were inspired by the general strike in France in May-June 1968.

> *"Some of the problems that have confronted anarchist organising and organisations in Ireland are similar to issues that are being faced by anarchists in the current historic period as imperialist and militarist aggression intensifies across the globe. This includes questions of uncritical support for the struggles of national liberation movements around an increasingly brutal and barbarous planet."* (p.90)

Members of the BAG took part in the foundation of Peoples Democracy (PD) on 9 October 1968. As the political situation unfolded, the gap grew between anarchists who remained within PD and those who did not. A few from West Belfast reverted to Republicanism, explaining that anarchism was a luxury in a time where national defence was needed. In March 1973, the remaining members of the BAG issued a press statement in response to claims in the English press that anarchists were aiding the Provisional IRA (PIRA). They explained that "the conditions that divide the working class are perpetuated by these groups through their inability or refusal to escape the trap of nationalism and sectarianism". (p.94) The others were angry at the statement, believing that the PIRA should not be criticised. The remaining BAG members, who had been criticised for not convening a full meeting of the group, then formed the Belfast Libertarian Group. Following detainment from the Royal Ulster Constabulary and threats from the Provos they disbanded in early 1974.

The descent into sectarian armed conflict shattered these anarchist groups. The next generation of anarchists formed without having experienced politics outside of the context of the Troubles. The Belfast Anarchist Collective (BAC) and Just Books were formed in 1978. The group included people from both sides of the conflict. The location of Just Books was accessible to both sides of the city's working class. However, criticism of the militarism of the Republican movement was absent. The BAC disappeared in the mid-eighties. There was overlap between its existence and the subsequent groups.

The Ballymena Anarchist Group was formed in 1981, and expanded its membership and became Organise! in late 1986. In the South, anarchists in Cork and Dublin established the Workers Solidarity Movement (WSM) in 1984. Membership of the WSM remained low until the May Day protest in Dublin in 2004. After a period of rapid growth, the organisation declined from 2010 onwards and disbanded in 2021. Organise! never experienced much growth but still exists. Though involved in similar campaigns (for abortion rights, anti-war activity, including direct action against US military use of Shannon airport during the Iraq war, against attempts at introducing water charges by both the Southern government and Stormont), each was largely limited to the North or South in its membership and activity. Both welcomed the 1994 ceasefires. Organise! explicitly argued for demilitarisation on the part of all combatants, including the state. Brannigan argues Organise! was clearer in its anti-militarism. They stressed that the victims of the Troubles were overwhelmingly working class. It led to the only place it was ever going to lead: a negotiated

settlement, not a Republican victory, much less a proletarian revolution. Brannigan argues national liberation struggles do not present an opportunity for but are toxic to working class interests.

He argues, as did the BAC, that the Irish state's neutrality and non-membership of NATO was a determining factor in the British military presence in the North. The end of the Cold War thus permitted an end to the Troubles. The situation has now changed, with rampant militarism, recurrent threats of conscription in the UK, and pressure on the South to join NATO since the war in Ukraine.

The final chapter, by Jasmine Lloyd, examines anarchist opposition to war in Britain during the Second World War. While anarchists and communists are often met with little pushback when it comes to revolutionary defeatism during the First World War, when it comes to the Second World War the conversation is more difficult as the inter-imperialist war takes the guise of an anti-fascist war or a people's war. As also covered in the first chapter, in the Russo-Ukrainian War today both sides are drawing on the image of the Second World War as an anti-fascist war to justify the ongoing conflict. She argues that those that profess to believe in the revolutionary potential of class struggle need to prioritise it regardless of its popularity.

In a 2008 debate, the anarchist Ian Bone (Class War) disagreed with the Socialist Party of Great Britain's (SPGB) position against the Second World War on the grounds that while the ruling class started it, the working class fought and won it. Lloyd points out this logic could be applied to all imperialist wars. She claims that ironically anarchists had been more actively opposed to the Second World War than the SPGB, giving the example of a 1942 debate with anarchists where the SPGB speaker refused to consider the possibility of direct action against the war by workers (though she does note that many SPGBers were conscious objectors and active in the workplace, but claims they were acting as individuals rather than as representatives of the party). The anarchist movement grew during the Second World War due to this principled opposition whereas, as mentioned above, it had become weaker in the interwar years. They challenged the idea it was a people's war or a revolutionary war. Thus, British anarchists today are ashamed or ignorant of anarchist history during the Second World War. This chapter attempts to set the record straight.

Despite draconian laws and trade union leaders participating in the war government, the number of strikes grew throughout the war. While anarchists participated in strikes, Labour, the Trades Union Congress (TUC), and Stalinists broke strikes. The Independent Labour Party (ILP) and Trotskyists, for their part, were "effectively opposed to the war without being completely against it". (p.119) Despite this, they were often involved in the same strikes. The Socialist Labour Party (SLP) and the aforementioned SPGB were also active during the war. There were also pacifists, both religious and secular. While "anarchist papers were widely read by pacifists, and anarchists heavily recruited from the pacifist movement", most pacifists were not sympathetic to anarchism and anarchists were opposed to pacifism. (p.120)

Anarchists during the Second World War

organised within the Anarchist Federation (AF), mostly based in London and Glasgow, which initially explicitly excluded pacifists and pro-war anarchists. Spanish anarchists joined the British army and those who did not were under pressure not to oppose the war for fear of being deported. By the Second World War, most anarchists had left the aforementioned APCF.(6) They were largely confined to Glasgow. The USM had split from the APCF in 1934 and were also primarily based in Glasgow. The USM was more concerned with pacifism than with the workers' movement. The Glasgow Anarchist Federation (GAF) had merged in 1940 from another split from the APCF and a Marxian study group. It is the only one of these Glasgow groups to have joined the AF. There was overlap between these organisations, with individuals contributing to each other's papers. Women were more prominent than in the wider left.

Though anarchists were imprisoned throughout the war, anarchists were surprised at the lack of targeted repression. Lloyd speculates this could have been due to anarchists undermining Stalinists, the small size of the movement despite its growth, the possibility that repression would undermine the idea that the war was fought to defend democracy or simply because repression might have backfired and increased the anarchists' popularity. More than repression, the AF's 1944-1945 split was the primary cause of its decline. London and Glasgow were divided and the GAF fell apart. Lloyd speculates that a cause of the split could have been that the Glasgow anarchists tended to be workers while the London anarchists "were perceived to be intellectuals and middle class". (p.131) Another possibility is that pacifists and certain pro-war Spanish anarchists had joined, causing tensions. Personality clashes between prominent members could have also been a cause. She believes that the AF's decline might also be due to being too confined to London and Glasgow and to a lack of respect for organisational structure and processes. War Commentary, the newspaper of the AF, became Freedom after the war and now defends the war in Ukraine. SolFed also traces its roots back to the AF. Its predecessor criticised the strikebreaking and colonialist policies of the post-war Labour government.

Anarchists pursued three main strategies against the war: conscientious objection, revolutionary agitation within the military, and organising within the workplace. The AF pursued all these. Many anarchists became conscious objectors (COs), though there was the usual debate on whether they should also refuse alternative service, which would result in imprisonment (the debate between COs and insoumis, for those familiar with the French version of the debate). Anarchist COs doing agricultural work in mobile gangs allied with others, such as SPGBers, against the capitalist-farmers and landowners within the farm-workers' union. Anarchists also helped deserters. Other anarchists argued against conscious objection, believing it best to organise against war within the army and vital industries.

While the APCF, preferring conscious objection and workplace disputes, criticised Trotskyists who believed revolutionaries should join the army, other anarchists believed that the Second World

War would see a wave of mutinies and soldiers' councils across the world like in 1917 and joined the army to agitate. Some believed that the army would be useful in teaching military techniques. War Commentary could easily be distributed amongst soldiers due to its innocuous name and soldiers wrote for it. Many anarchists were imprisoned for agitating within the army. "Some anarchists signed up as COs to win exemption from conscription, before voluntarily joining the armed forces as agitators". (p.137) This pattern may have brought them to the attention of the authorities. Ultimately, anarchists had little influence within the army.

Certain vital industries protected from conscription made for viable alternatives to conscious objection. Anarchists supported strikes, for instance the 1944 Clydeside and Tyneside apprentices' strike. When four Trotskyists were imprisoned for their involvement, anarchists participated in the Anti-Labour Laws Victims Defence Committee which got them released. The GAF was involved, alongside Trotskyist and ILP trade unionists, in the 1943-1944 strike at the Barr and Stroud engineering factory. The strike came under pressure from trade union bureaucrats and Stalinists. While anarchists managed to establish footholds in certain industries, collective anarchist organisation within workplaces was ultimately lacking, especially outside Glasgow. Of the three strategies, Lloyd argues agitation within the workplace should have been prioritised the most.

Lloyd believes that "the anarchist analysis of war put forward in WWII still holds merit to this day. It is clear that the tensions between China and Taiwan or Ukraine and Russia has more to do with economic factors such as the control of markets and the interests of economic blocs, or imperial spheres of influence, than ideology or a desire to prevent injustices". (p.150) She argues that "we must continue to fight against nationalism and militarism, and for a working class revolution to establish a global, moneyless, stateless and classless society". (p.153-154) Earlier, Brannigan also summed up the book's main message, which we can only endorse:

> *"No matter the outcome of the war in territorial terms, workers on all sides of the borders (redrawn or not) will be subject to more exploitative forms of capital and harsher, more nationalist and authoritarian regimes. This and all other wars must be opposed through anti-militarist propaganda and action, or we will witness our class being increasingly divided and sucked into romantic and chauvinistic nationalism in service of those who control what we are told is 'our' nation. Jingoism, patriotism, war-mongering, intensified nationalism, sectarianism, and racism make us weaker and more divided – more easily exploited and oppressed. It plays into the hands of those seeking to 'divide and conquer' and weakens working class solidarity. The common misery, struggles and victories of the working-class are ignored, twisted, sidelined and written out of history. Our disaffection is recuperated by war, the threat of war and the creation of external enemies. States and capital profit and secure themselves while convincing us that other working class and poor people are our enemies and*

sending us out to kill each other. Even cases of national liberation can be managed and accommodated as capitalist exploitation nor state oppression are in reality confronted – in the 'best' outcome one state will simply be replaced by another. War divides and weakens our class and as a direct result weakens movements based on the real liberation of the working-class. Against this anarchists must seek unity based on the common struggle of the working-class against capital and state – all states – towards the creation of a truly free and equal society." (p.107)

Despite our political differences, the fact that some anarchists are still attempting to excavate an internationalist tendency within their tradition is a positive development. Although the book would have benefited from a deeper framework for contextualising the current drive to war[7], we nevertheless hope it will spark a wider discussion among anarchists, particularly in the face of current attempts to revive the splintered anarchist scene in the UK.

Erwan
Communist Workers' Organisation
November 2025

Notes:

(1) For more on the NWBCW initiative, see: https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2023-07-05/the-no-war-but-the-class-war-initiative

(2) One of the authors of the introduction had previously written this text on the subject: https://libcom.org/article/british-anarchism-succumbs-war-fever

(3) The phenomenon of anarcho-Corbynism was criticised at the time: https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2017-06-07/anarcho-corbynism-and-support-for-labour

(4) For an explanation of the economic driving force behind capitalism's inbuilt tendency to crisis and war, see: https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2022-08-31/capitalism-s-economic-foundations-part-i

(5) For a critique of anarchist support for Rojava, see https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2014-10-30/in-rojava-people%E2%80%99s-war-is-not-class-war ; for our analysis of what happened in Rojava, see: https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2022-10-12/rojava-the-myths-and-the-reality

(6) The group Wildcat have previously written about the history of the APCF during the Second World War: https://libcom.org/article/class-war-home-front-revolutionary-opposition-second-world-war-anti-parliamentary-communist

(7) For our view on how we got here, refer to the editorial – *A Critical Juncture for Humanity* – in the present issue of *Revolutionary Perspectives*, and our previous perspectives documents, such as: https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2025-08-20/fifty-years-of-the-cwo-perspectives-for-2025-and-beyond

1926 General Strike: Ten Days that Failed to Shake the World

A hundred years on, the general strike of 1926 remains a mythical event – in the face of relatively low levels of class struggles in recent decades, many today look upon it with the rose-tinted glasses of misplaced nostalgia. Arguably the largest industrial dispute in Britain's history, it lasted only ten days (nine if counting from 4 May) before being called off by the union leadership. Grasping the lessons of 1926 means understanding why it concluded the way it did: with dashed hopes and failure to accomplish its aims.

Post-War Britain

> *"We were told that this was 'the war to end war' and some of us at least believed it. It may sound extraordinarily naïve, but I think one had to believe it. All the mud, blood and bestiality only made sense on the assumption that it was the last time civilised man would ever have to suffer it. I could not believe that anyone who had been through it could ever allow it to happen again. I thought that the ordinary man on both sides would rise up as one and kick any politician in the teeth who even mentioned the possibility of war."* (Lieutenant John Nettleton, Rifle Brigade, quoted in: Peter Hart, *1918: A Very British Victory*, 2009)

Four years of generalised war left deep scars on European society. Revolutions brought down the Russian and German Empires, new independent states were formed, borders shifted repeatedly and new territorial disputes flared up. Britain, the oldest capitalist state, managed to avoid some of the turmoil seen on the continent and, despite the Easter Rising in Ireland and the Home Rule movement in India, largely preserved its Empire abroad.

Nevertheless, major changes within British society had taken place. The war put a dampener on the growing wave of workers' strikes which characterised the period of the Great Unrest.(1) The British economy was reoriented towards war production and patriotism became the highest civic duty. Industrial action in the war industries was made illegal under the Defence of the Realm Act 1914, which also gave the government the power to prosecute anybody deemed to be jeopardising the war effort (nevertheless, strikes still took place, as did other social struggles, for example opposing rent hikes or resisting conscription). Tendencies towards greater state intervention in the economy were exacerbated and links between the unions and the state were strengthened. With men being mobilised, labour shortages were filled by integrating women into the workforce on an unprecedented scale.

The signing of the Treaty of Versailles ostensibly meant a return to normality. However, the British ruling class recognised things could not remain quite as they were, not with the threat of revolution hanging over Europe after the events of October 1917. To this end, demobilised soldiers were promised a "land fit for heroes". By extending the vote to all men over the age of 21 and all women over the age 30 the government

hoped to make workers feel like they had a stake in the system. The introduction of some basic insurance and welfare policies aimed to relieve poverty and ease people into the labour market. This however was not enough. What many soldiers found upon return was unemployment, homelessness and inflation. It took time for the British economy to readjust to post-war realities and in the meantime workers were expected to bear the costs. No surprise then that some significant workers' struggles broke out first in 1919 and then again in 1921. Miners played a key role here and it was their dispute that precipitated the general strike of 1926.

The Miners

Because of the war, the government began to take over the ownership of mines towards the end of 1916, in order to ensure they could supply the country with enough energy. Miners were given pay rises to prevent strikes and maintain the workforce (many were enlisting in order to escape the terrible working conditions). With the end of the war, demand for coal sharply fell. What's more, under the Treaty of Versailles, the allies forced Germany to pay reparations, which included coal provisions. European markets were now flooded, with the price of coal plummeting as a result. This had a detrimental effect on the UK coal industry – inevitably, attacks on miners' working conditions were seen as the solution. In March 1921, the mines returned to their private owners, who immediately forced lower pay and longer hours on the miners. Miners who refused to accept the new conditions were met by lock-outs lasting three months. And then on 15 April 1921 the rail and transport unions refused to support the miners, essentially breaking the so-called "Triple Alliance" established between those unions back in 1914. Reflecting the dour mood of betrayal, the day was henceforth dubbed "Black Friday". The miners were effectively starved back into work, worse was yet to come.

Then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Churchill's decision to return to the gold standard in 1925, after it had been abandoned at the start of the war, led to further appreciation of the pound and again upset the export of coal and steel. So instead of any post-war prosperity, further pay cuts for the miners were announced in June 1925. Unlike four years earlier, this time the response of the other unions was more pro-active. In order to avoid the possibility of a general strike in the immediate term, the government granted a subsidy to stave off the pay cuts in the mines. However, this was understood by all sides to be a temporary measure, only delaying the inevitable. While trade union leaders prevaricated, the ruling class used this as an opportunity to gather forces. The police, the army and the navy were put on standby, and the right-wing Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS) was absorbed by the government to assemble volunteers for strike-breaking (these mainly came from layers of the middle class: various professionals, retired army officers, young men working in finance, and university students).

Finally, on 10 March 1926, a royal commission set up by Stanley Baldwin, then Conservative Prime Minister, recommended the end of the subsidy and pay cuts of 13.5%. Negotiations with the union broke down on 1 May, and the

employers locked-out the miners again. The Trades Union Congress (TUC), which took upon itself the responsibility to lead the dispute for the miners, wanted to avoid a general strike and tried to reopen the talks, but their options were now increasingly limited, and finally a "coordinated industrial action" in support of the miners was announced to begin on 3 May.

The General Strike

> *"The general strike is a challenge to the parliament and is the road to anarchy and ruin."* (Baldwin, *British Gazette*, 6 May 1926)

On 3 May, at one minute to midnight, the general strike officially began. The call-out proved popular, and between 1.5 and 2 million workers joined the miners. The majority of these were in transport, heavy industry, and energy sectors as well as the printing and building trades, but the TUC had them walk out in staggered waves. As a result, public transport was nearly at a standstill, and national newspapers could not be printed (the government had to transmit most of its announcements over radio). For the purpose of keeping control over the movement that had been unleashed, the General Council of the TUC set up sub-committees to direct the strike centrally (eventually coalescing into the Strike Organisation Committee headed by Ernest Bevin of the Labour Party). However, it was existing Trades Councils or the emerging Councils of Action which actually organised things on the ground. The distinction between these bodies was not always clear-cut:

> *"The controlling body in each town had various names. Often the trades council transformed itself into a council of action (at Ilford an 'action committee'), and a central, or joint, strike committee sometimes would work in harmony (or otherwise) with it. In Basingstoke there was a vigilance committee, elsewhere there were generally separate strike committees for each industry – sometimes not accepting any joint control. ... These committees or councils remained local in character, and were not federated or regionally controlled, except at Merseyside, Dartford (a divisional council) and in Northumberland and Durham (a general council)."* (Raymond Postgate, *The Workers' History of the Great Strike*, 1927)

The operation of these Councils of Action, essentially strike committees, was far from smooth. Although a few were formed already by the end of 1925, most came into existence only after the strike had started. Some were in competition with each other and others only represented the narrow interests of a particular trade union. And, though not all central directives were always followed, ultimately they never freed themselves from the stifling influence of the TUC. But at their best, they allowed for the coordination of the strike beyond sectoral and trade divisions, produced their own strike bulletins, organised mass picketing, provided canteens for strikers and their families, and in some cities even managed to enforce some control over the movement of people and goods.

As the strike proceeded, there were confrontations across the country. Workers tried to physically stop traffic and got into altercations with strike-breakers. Police attempted to disperse pickets by force,

raided the offices of unions and political parties, and arrested workers for as little as just distributing a strike bulletin. There were acts of sabotage to stop the trains or buses from running. Some Councils of Action formed their own Workers' Defence Corps and Special Pickets' Corps to maintain order.

On 6 May, Baldwin declared that "constitutional government is being attacked" by the unions. The next day the government informed the armed forces that any actions they take to "aid the civil power" will receive its full support. The TUC responded by clarifying it is "not seeking to substitute unconstitutional government", nor is it "desirous of undermining our Parliamentary institutions." Despite all these threats and intimidations, the strike movement was only growing stronger. The OMS, responsible for procuring volunteers and seen by some as "fascist" stormtroopers, could not neutralise it either: most volunteers lacked the experience to carry out the jobs of the striking workers properly and there was of course no question of them going down the mines.

Yet on 12 May the General Council of the TUC met with the government at Downing Street and – without consulting the striking workers, with no guarantees of any deal for the miners, nor assurance that there wouldn't be any victimisation – the trade union leaders suddenly called off the strike. This decision was initially met with disbelief and confusion. The Workers' Chronicle, issued by the Newcastle Trades Council of Action, did not mince its words: "Never in the history of the working-class struggle – with the exception of the treachery of our leaders in 1914 – has there been such a calculated betrayal of working-class interests as has overtaken us this week."[(2)] On 13 May more joined the strike than on any previous day, showing there was still real appetite for the fight. But the movement didn't continue beyond that as the unions and the state, hand in hand, were successful in getting workers back to work.

The miners, now on their own, still refused to accept the pay cuts and remained locked-out until November. Though local relief funds were set up and some donations were received from the USSR, hunger and poverty finally forced them to surrender.

> *"All the way through to November it was a jug of soup a day; twice we got half a crown from the money which the Russians sent, and once or twice we got eight shillings a shift for shovelling coal gum which the hospitals were allowed to have for fuel. And that was all. I was in lodgings at £2 a week and had to pay every penny back afterwards. If you were married it was worse; you had to sell your furniture; if they gave you parish relief, it was, 'You don't need that carpet; why do you want those fancy curtains?'"* (John Campbell, a Scottish miner, quoted in: R.A. Leeson, *Strike: A Live History*, 1973)

The defeat of the strike also had wider consequences. Trade union membership fell and lethargy set in. Defenders of the capitalist system, including on the left, were jubilant, and thought it would be the nail in the coffin for the idea that strike action could accomplish anything. And to cement their victory, the government passed the Trade Disputes and Trade Unions Act 1927 which banned sympathy

strikes and put restrictions on mass picketing (it was repealed in 1946 but then reincarnated under Thatcher).

The Political Actors

The Labour Party was founded in 1900, at a conference sponsored by the TUC, as a political representation committee for the trade unions in Parliament. By 1926, it had its first stint in government with the short-lived Ramsay MacDonald ministry of 1924 (when it lost a vote of no confidence, Baldwin came back to power). Although clinging to socialist rhetoric, MacDonald quickly revealed which side of the class war he was on: his government refused to back the railway workers in their dispute and then invoked the Emergency Powers Act 1920 in response to strikes on the docks and the London underground. No surprise then that workers could not rely on Labour, the party of the capitalist left, to take their side in 1926. There was also the Independent Labour Party (ILP), ostensibly more socialist in character but essentially a pressure group inside Labour, with members double carding (all the way to the top: MacDonald was himself in the ILP). So although the ILP expressed support for the strike, it advocated a policy of moderation and did not put forward any revolutionary strategy.

Workers with a more militant mindset could turn to the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), which in the months leading up to the strike took the need for practical preparation of the struggle more seriously. In fact, this process of radicalisation was anticipated both by Labour (which pre-emptively excluded members of the CPGB from its ranks) and the Conservative government (which pre-emptively had leading members of the CPGB arrested).

In 1924 the CPGB set up the National Minority Movement, headed by Tom Mann, in order to widen its influence among the working class and the trade unions. It was this organisation which took up the initiative of creating Councils of Action – though the CPGB leadership warned "there should be no rival body to the Trades Council".[3] And this is what characterised the contradictory perspectives of the CPGB – on the one hand, the party advocated extending the strike and making it a powerful weapon of struggle; on the other hand, the party did everything to shackle the movement within the boundaries of the official "Labour Movement". The reasons for this go back to the botched process of the formation of the CPGB in 1920 and the political directives now coming from Moscow. Due to the failure of the revolutionary wave in Europe and the isolation of the USSR, the Third International was increasingly imposing policies on its affiliated communist parties which tended towards appeasement with the capitalist world instead of world revolution – in the UK, this was for example indicated by the formation of the Anglo-Russian Committee in 1925, essentially an attempt at a "united front" between the bureaucracy of the British and Soviet trade unions. So despite the fact many CPGB members played a significant role in the movement, the party as a whole failed to serve as a reliable revolutionary reference point.

The policy of the "united front" locked the CPGB into treating the TUC leadership and the Labour Party as possible allies. When the general strike ended in defeat,

there were some internal disputes within the party as to whether it did enough to denounce the "treachery" of the General Council of the TUC, but the problem went further. The CPGB fundamentally did not understand the structural role the TUC played as an organ of mediation between workers and bosses. The leaders of the TUC did not "betray" the workers, so much as they fulfilled the function they were always meant to. The CPGB limited its analysis to a failure of leadership:

> *"This strike was broken not by the power of the capitalist class, but by the failure of the Right Wing leadership. The failure of the Right Wing leadership is not a temporary failure of courage or judgement, but a failure of the entire policy which they have pursued."* (CPGB Executive Committee, "Why the Strike Failed", *Workers' Weekly*, 4 June 1926)

Of course the sentiment being expressed here is that communists should have been in positions of leadership instead. But the dangers of this were evident already a few years earlier – in 1921, Robert Williams, the president of the National Transport Workers' Federation who took the infamous decision not to support the miners on "Black Friday", was himself actually a member of the CPGB. He was expelled from the party for it and re-joined Labour; however, episodes like that should have raised wider political questions about whether it's the communist who changes the leadership of the union bureaucracy, or whether it's the union bureaucracy that changes the communist. As if this weren't enough, to challenge the "Right Wing leadership" the CPGB demanded... more power to the General Council of the TUC and further entanglement in the compromised Labour Party!

> *"A trade union re-organisation campaign for (1) 100 per cent trade unionism, (2) the granting of greater power to the General Council, (3) the strengthening of local centres of working-class solidarity by the creation of more powerful factory committees and trades councils. ... The development of a left-wing policy and leadership in the Labour Party, around a programme of working-class demands which will challenge capitalism in a fundamental fashion and the co-ordination of parliamentary activity with the mass movement outside."* (CPGB Executive Committee, "Why the Strike Failed", *Workers' Weekly*, 4 June 1926)

In other words, in 1926 militant workers lacked a political organisation independent of the Labour Party and its trade unions. Groups like the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB), Sylvia Pankhurst's Communist Workers' Party (CWP), or Guy Aldred's Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation (APCF), had by then either dissolved, been reduced to a rump local existence, or failed to make any significant intervention in the movement. The APCF rightly countered the CPGB slogan "All Power to the General Council" with "NO Power to the General Council" and "ALL POWER to Labour through its Strike Committees and Mass Meetings"[(4)] – however, the special issue of the paper in which these slogans were put forward was published four days after the strike had already been called off. The SPGB also commented on the strike after it ended, summing up that the main

lesson was "Trust and ye shall be betrayed" and that "the same 'leaders' were entrusted with power, and acted along the same lines as before"[5], but did not propose any alternative course of action that the workers could take in their struggle.

The Lessons

> *"While it lasted, though, it was good; an organised way of life, based on not working. It was as good as a university course. We had speakers down, like Tommy Jackson, the Marxist lecturer, and we gave them good audiences. Harnessed audiences, in fact, for we were not going anywhere. So we used the time to learn; you can learn something even out of a defeat. And you must remember that all the great battles of those days were rearguard actions that we fought and lost – 1921, 1925, 1926."* (John Collinson, a Durham miner, quoted in: R.A. Leeson, *Strike: A Live History*, 1973)

Ever since 1926, much of the British left has been simply repeating the CPGB line that the defeat of the general strike was due to a failure of leadership. And every time there's any sign of increased industrial action, as most recently during the 2022/3 strike wave,[6] the same calls for the TUC to declare a general strike are heard. In other words, the lessons of 1926 have not been learned.

In contrast, fifty years ago the newly founded Communist Workers' Organisation (CWO) wrote:

> *"One valuable lesson to come out of the general strike was to show quite clearly the nature of the unions. In criticising the role of the unions we must make quite clear that it is not simply a question of bad or stupid or reactionary leaders but that the unions themselves are part and parcel of the capitalist state. We do not seek to reform the unions but rather to abolish them along with all the other aspects of capitalism. That the unions were closely bound up with the capitalist state became obvious to many in 1914 when they stood solid in their support for the imperialist war. But for many workers the realisation of the new role of the unions as part of the state was not to come till the general strike. ... For the unions the general strike was a break from their previous role of parliamentarism, a syndicalist misadventure never to be repeated. ... For the class the general strike can never be the way forward. Imposed as it is by the unions acting to contain the struggle for the capitalist state, it only reflects weakness and demoralisation of a defeated working class. Today, as the working class continues to fight the attacks of capital, any generalised strike activity will not be the result of a union bureaucrats call for 'action', but the response by the working class to deepen and generalise their own movement in order to take it into a higher level. However, this will not be a general strike as in 1926, but a mass strike produced by the need to unify the struggles of the class against the state."* (CWO, *Workers' Voice*, no. 18, April/May 1976)

In 1926, both the ruling class and the false friends in the Labour Party and the union bureaucracy were afraid of the same thing: the organised power of the working class. J. R. Clynes, member of the General Council, said it right there and then at the

1925 congress of the TUC: "I am not in fear of the capitalist class. The only class I fear is our own."(7)

Today, just as a century ago, it is the historical task of workers to rediscover that power which has the potential to shake the foundations of the capitalist world order, and save humanity from a future of endless wars, economic crises, and environmental destruction.

Dyjbas
November 2025
Communist Workers' Organisation

Notes:

(1) *The Great Unrest 1910-1914: When the Working Class Shook Britain's Capitalist Foundations*, https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2011-08-23/the-great-unrest-1910-1914-when-the-working-class-shook-britain%E2%80%99s-capitalist

(2) Newcastle Trades Council of Action, *Workers' Chronicle*, 14 May 1926

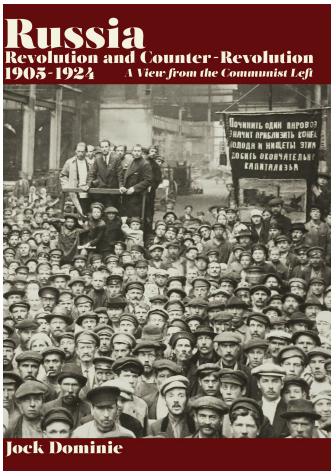
(3) J. T. Murphy, "A Dangerous Situation: Confusion About Councils of Action", *Workers' Weekly*, 16 October 1925

(4) APCF, *The Commune Special Anti-Parliamentary Communist Gazette*, 16 May 1926

(5) SPGB, "The Result of "Trust": A Lesson of the Great Strike", *Socialist Standard*, June 1926

(6) *Notes on the UK Strike Wave*, https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2023-01-11/notes-on-the-uk-strike-wave

(7) J. R. Clynes, quoted in J. Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, Vol. 2, 1969



276pp, £12 + postage.

Russia: Revolution and Counter-Revolution 1905-1924 - A View from the Communist Left
Jock Dominie

The Russian Revolution remains a landmark event in history. For the bourgeois historians, the October Revolution is thought to be a tragedy that set back the achievements of the "democratic" February Revolution, and allowed the Bolsheviks to wreak havoc on their citizens and the world. For the Stalinists, the events of 1917 paved the way for the birth of the USSR, which they point to as a prototypical example of "socialism in one country". In reality, the February and October Revolutions were both part of the same proletarian revolution.

Damen's Critique of Pannekoek's "Five Theses"

The Second World War officially ended in 1945. Despite episodes of mass struggle in a few select countries, there was no widespread working class movement to end it like that in Russia in 1917, and Germany in 1918. The war only ended with the total victory of one imperialist camp over another ("unconditional surrender") which brought about a new world order. A world order in which the capitalist states of both East and West played an ever more active role in mediating the relations between the classes, completely integrating the social democratic and labour mass parties and trade unions which claimed to represent workers' interests. Revolutionaries who survived the war had to re-examine the changes in the terrain of struggle and what that meant for the working class and the fight for a new society.

It's in this context that Anton Pannekoek[1], a key figure of the Dutch-German Communist Left, wrote his "Theses On The Fight Of The Working Class Against Capitalism". This short document was published in May 1947, in the pages of the *Southern Advocate for Workers' Councils*.[2] A year later, the theses received a critical reply from Onorato Damen, a representative of the Italian Communist Left.[3] This reply was published in *Prometeo*, the journal of the Internationalist Communist Party (PCInt).[4] We have been asked about this exchange, so for the first time in English, we publish here Damen's critique of Pannekoek's "five theses" as an example of the debates that took place within the broader Communist Left following the Second World War.

Although Pannekoek recognised the fact that parties would exist as part of the class war, he gave them only a propagandist and educational role. He put his faith in "spontaneity" expressed in wildcat strikes, strike committees, and workers' councils. Damen saw this as a misunderstanding of the role of the party and how class consciousness develops. For him the class party is not just a propaganda organisation. It is an indicator of the level of the revolutionary consciousness of the class: "The class gives rise to the party as a condition of its existence". However, they both learned from the counter-revolution in isolated Russia that class rule cannot be substituted by party rule. As Damen later wrote:

> *"It would be a gross and dangerous error for the future to believe that the moment the working class creates their party, then they somehow relinquish – totally or even partially – those attributes which make them the gravedigger of capitalism, as if others could act as an alternative and have the same consciousness of the need to struggle against the class enemy and to overthrow it in revolution. At no time and for no reason does the proletariat abandon its combative role. It does not delegate to others its historical mission, and it does not give power away to anyone, not even to its political party."* (*1952 Platform of the Internationalist Communist Party* in *Revolutionary Perspectives 15*)

Pannekoek could have agreed with this himself. This is why Damen's main criticism of the council communists is that, while they have assimilated certain key lessons of the revolutionary upsurge following the First World War, they have since politically detached themselves from the struggles and experiences of the proletariat. He argues that revolutionary activity cannot amount to shouting "empty slogans that no one or almost no one is willing to carry out", that a class party has to be re-built in the "fire of daily struggle".

Damen takes Pannekoek to task on the question of abstentionism and workers' councils. Firstly, he does not completely rule out the tactical possibility of using elections as an opportunity for revolutionary agitation. In practice, the PCInt only ever found it worthwhile to do so twice, in 1946 and 1948 (i.e. at the time this article was written). This was done not in order to ask for votes, but to put forward the internationalist and anti-parliamentary message to a wider audience, and to reveal the counter-revolutionary role played by the Stalinist Italian Communist Party (PCI).[5] Like we pointed out in the introduction to another Damen translation published by us recently,

> *"As Damen later wrote, it was "probably the last time" that such an opportunity would present itself, and in the pre-internet (and indeed pre-television) era the odds were not so heavily stacked against the tactic of using the electoral process to make revolutionary propaganda. Today any such participation is more likely to strengthen the ideological power of capital considering the financial resources given by the capitalists to the parties inside the system.*" (*Parliamentary Democracy and Fascism: The Two Faces of the Bourgeoisie* in *Revolutionary Perspectives 26*)

In his response to Pannekoek, Damen shows how the boycott of elections only becomes more than a slogan at high points in the class struggle, when an alternative to bourgeois parliaments actually exists – the workers' councils. Secondly, Damen argues that these workers' councils are not a permanent alternative to the trade unions, because in the absence of the right revolutionary conditions they can end up carrying out the very same functions of mediation between labour and capital as trade unions (today we could point to Germany 1920, Yugoslavia 1950 or Poland 1956 as examples of what happens when workers' councils become recognised by the capitalist state).[6] To overcome the separation between class and party, which is inevitable particularly during phases of retreat, Damen points to internationalist factory groups.[7] In the 1940s the PCInt had an active network of such intermediary bodies. Although they also incited struggle at the economic level, they primarily acted as a means of winning workers to the revolutionary cause. They did not take on trade union responsibilities, but regrouped revolutionaries in the workplace on a political basis.

Today, after fifty years of class defeats, revolutionary minorities everywhere are reduced to little more than propaganda groups. This however, more than ever, calls for the need to "painstakingly rebuild and develop, day by day, the concrete grounds for a recovery." The symptoms of

the capitalist drive to war – nationalism, militarism, repression and austerity – are already throwing up isolated instances of class resistance. Revolutionary minorities have to be able to relate constructively to the struggles happening now, no matter how limited they may seem.

Communist Workers' Organisation
September 2025

Notes to the Introduction:

(1) Anton Pannekoek (1873-1960) was, along with the likes of Lenin, Luxemburg and Bordiga, a representative of the revolutionary wing of Social Democracy. With the likes of Herman Gorter (1864-1927), he later played an influential role in the foundation of the Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD) but retired from active political militancy after the 1920s and focused on his astronomical career instead. He continued to write for various magazines and journals of the Dutch-German Communist Left and in the 1940s he was loosely associated with the group Communistenbond Spartacus in Holland, but was never a member. For more on Pannekoek, see: https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2024-09-19/anton-pannekoek-as-a-revolutionary-marxist-a-review-article

(2) The *Southern Advocate for Workers' Councils* was a short-lived magazine published in Melbourne in the 1940s and edited by James Arthur Dawson (1889–1958). Previously a militant of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in Australia, Dawson gradually moved closer to the positions of the Dutch-German Communist Left. He helped to publish Pannekoek's book *Workers' Councils* in English, but in his magazine he also reprinted articles from the PCInt and other groups. Pannekoek's 1947 theses are available here:
https://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoe/1947/theses-fight.htm

(3) Onorato Damen (1893-1979) was a militant of the Communist Party of Italy (PCd'I), and played a key role in the fight against the Stalinist takeover of the party. Remaining in Italy, he spent many years in fascist prisons, but he did not cease his political activity, which eventually resulted in the foundation of the PCInt in 1943 in the midst of the Second World War. The PCInt is today the Italian affiliate of the Internationalist Communist Tendency (ICT). For more on Damen, see: https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2019-10-14/forty-years-since-the-death-of-onorato-damen

(4) *Prometeo* was first a periodical published in 1924 by the Italian Left under the direction of Bordiga, later continued – from 1928 to 1938 – as the organ of the Italian Left Fraction in Exile. In 1943 it was the underground magazine of the clandestine PCInt, and after the war it became the official journal of the party which continues to be regularly published to this day. The article in question was published in *Prometeo 10* (Series I), June-July 1948. https://www.leftcom.org/it/articles/1948-06-01/sulle-cinque-tesi-di-pannekoek

(5) For how and why the PCInt intervened in those elections, see: https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2015-05-01/don-t-vote

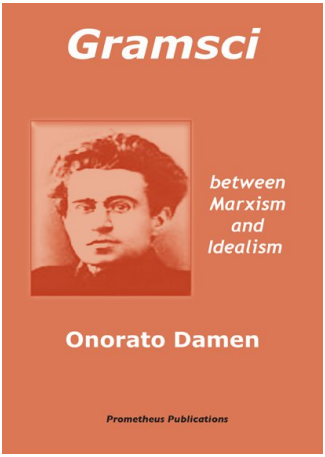
(6) In Germany, the *Betriebsrätegesetz* (Works' Councils Act) of 1920, institutionalised and transformed the workers' councils which sprang up in the context of the post-war revolutionary wave into works' councils, organisations

representing workers in collective bargaining negotiations at the shop-floor level. In Yugoslavia, the *Zakon o samoupravljanju* (Self-Government Act) of 1950, set up workers' councils under the guise of "socialist self-management", in reality serving as advisory bodies promoting post-war capitalist reconstruction and production increases. In Poland, the *Ustawa o radach robotniczych* (Act on Workers' Councils) of 1956, was introduced following the emergence of workers' councils during the mass protests of the Polish October, in order to bring them under the control of the party-state and its trade unions and quickly sideline them afterwards.

(7) Today, in the face of the changes in the composition of the working class over the last fifty years, we tend to speak of "workplace" rather than just "factory" groups. https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2012-09-12/our-intervention-within-the-working-class

Gramsci between Marxism and Idealism
Onorato Damen

Antonio Gramsci was to become the tool of the Comintern in manoeuvring the Communist Party of Italy out of of the hands of the revolutionaries who had founded it. His tragic death in Fascist custody has made him a martyr to many of the reformist left. Damen's considerations on Gramsci's shortcomings as an analytical and practical Marxist are an antidote to that. This volume also contains the Platform of the Committee of Intesa (Alliance) of 1925 which Gramsci had condemned.



151pp, £7.50 + postage.

On Pannekoek's "Five Theses"

It was the critical thinking and a firm and sometimes light-hearted attitude which had initially drawn our attention to and sympathy for the group of the Dutch Tribunists[8], today known as the council communists. However, reading the recent "five theses" by Comrade Pannekoek makes us more strongly and bitterly feel the distance that separates them from the original positions of this group which, if nothing else, had the appeal of a bold polemic, albeit overshadowed by that slight touch of idealism that is, after all, characteristic of every form of political extremism.

We seem to discern in these "five theses" the final stage of a whole process of decline in the Dutch workerist group[9], due to its lack of adherence to the classical line of revolutionary Marxism and its tenuous connection to the struggles and experiences of the proletariat.

Added to this, we see how movements, such as those of the Tribunists or council communists, lose their impact and prestige as events force them to rely solely on their own inner light. The potential they had when they were part of that powerful complex of parties of the Communist International has been reduced to negligible proportions. Having ceased to juggle ideas, theories, and programmes, these movements are forced to confront the course of events with their own ideological and critical baggage, and their particular tactical approaches to the proletarian struggle.

In short, in the theoretical positions, conceptions, and attitudes of schools, groups, and isolated revolutionaries – in all these fragments that survived the enormous upheaval that befell the political movement of the international proletariat with the victory of the counter-revolution in Russia and the Second Imperialist War – there is, we keep saying, a tendency that no longer coincides with the traditional line of Marxism. It attempts to escape the harshness of the defeat suffered with purely subjective expedients and stratagems, rather than subjecting this defeat to critical examination in the light of the objective possibilities of working class struggle. Instead of the hard and inexorable method of drawing out the motives and limits of the proletarian struggle from within, from its own class experience, they prefer the easier method, that of operating outside this experience according to ideal schemes to which the needs and actions of the masses are raised from time to time, attributing to them possibilities and virtues that the masses have never historically demonstrated in their own right.

Thus, both the theories and politics of mechanistic spontaneity and wait-and-see pessimism, as well as those who believe in the mystique of a self-sufficient workerism in terms of will and revolutionary concreteness, derail Marxism.

In this flurry of iconoclasm against every position achieved by the proletarian movement, against certain established principles, and against ideas that have become cornerstones of the revolution, which recent and ruthless verifications of events have validated both doctrinally and politically, the Dutch group of council

communists is perhaps the only one that still appears anchored to a continuity of thought, and it is this consideration that prompted us to examine Pannekoek's theses closely. They bring together, in a strange synthesis, two major deviations from Marxism: the theory and politics of spontaneity and empirical voluntarism, the idea that organisational forms have the miraculous power of overcoming opportunism.

For the past thirty years, the theory of boycotting parliament and the reactionary trade unions has been the main theme of the controversy that already pitted Lenin against some left-wing groups within the Communist International(10); not to mention the identical attitude which, before and during Lenin's time, has been and still is a characteristic feature of the followers of Sorelian syndicalism(11) and anarcho-syndicalists.

Can we say that the terms of the controversy that arose back then between the Bolsheviks on the one hand, and the Dutch Tribunists and German workerists on the other, more precisely between Lenin and Gorter-Pannekoek, are the same as those that recur today in the controversy between us and the council communists? It seems not.

Our Dutch comrades have generally stuck to their theoretical and tactical positions, without questioning whether a single episode in the great and harsh experience of the international proletariat in recent years has given those positions historical validity, that is, whether the path they have traced and pursued is truly the right one, the only one left to revolutionaries to go beyond capitalism. Rather than repeat the polemical arguments formulated in Lenin's *"Left-Wing" Communism*, which it would be absurd to do today, we prefer to place before us the results of an experience that critically takes into account all those lessons assimilated in these last decades by the proletarian movement.

This experience warns against facile individual extremism or making sharp turns when faced with the responsibility of leading the revolutionary party, it warns against the amateurism of boycott slogans when the masses are objectively very far from "feeling" the historical necessity of such an action and thus lack the specific organs for a boycott. But it also denies class consistency, and therefore the possibility of tactical development and ferment to Lenin's beloved theory of revolutionary parliamentarism. Today, Lenin's other statement, that the activity of communists in bourgeois parliaments should be considered as a section of our work, is also being examined with a more realistic and informed approach, and there is a tendency to place greater emphasis on the policy of participation in certain electoral battles. The parliamentary tactic is either synonymous with revolutionary defeatism or meaningless, given that normal parliamentary practice is inconceivable for the proletarian party today. And it would not be in the interests of the revolutionary struggle to preclude the party from the tactical possibility of operating in concrete terms as a force of revolutionary defeatism *à la* Liebknecht(12) in moments of high historical tension and in the lead up to war.

The tactic of dual deployment, in the country and in the parliament, such as was carried out in Germany at the time of the Saxony and Thuringia governments(13),

can only ultimately lead to Hitler, under no circumstances to the revolutionary conquest of power; it has thus been proven to be the most effective weapon of opportunism. One cannot and must not manoeuvre within a bourgeois fortress, such as the parliament, at the very moment when the proletarian masses are pressing in from all sides and attacking it head-on.

The tactic of dual deployment has so far been proven to be the basis for compromise and has never served as a springboard for revolutionary action.

So why should emphasis be placed on the revolutionary party's participation in this or that electoral battle, which is in any case anything but revolutionary?

The tactical importance of this participation must be understood in Leninist terms[14]: because the masses actively participate in the election, and they participate under the leadership of the parties of betrayal that control them and imprison them with the suggestion of the democratic conquest of power. And until capitalism is on the verge of collapse, this suggestion will retain its intrinsic originality and strength.

The masses, on their own, are not capable of forming an anti-parliamentary, anti-electoral and anti-majoritarian consciousness, in a word, an anti-democratic one. And even when they come up against the reality of most open and blatant denial of all the promises of parliamentarism and feel the sting of electoral mockery, there may be reactions of mistrust and disgust and individual cases of active aversion, but if there is no critical, careful, constant and persuasive class action by the proletarian party, history teaches us that everything will once again be reduced to a moment of confusion and passive indifference, more or less generalised, which will inevitably be sucked up by a new wave of parliamentary and electoral euphoria, and so on.

For the purposes of revolutionary struggle, it is a question of creating the awareness of a class divide among the masses corrupted by the ideology of democratic parliamentarism, in order to prevent them from once again being lured, through the suggestion of a hypothetical revolutionary parliamentarism, towards the shallows of compromise during the revolutionary offensive.

But awareness of this class divide cannot be created unless steps have first been taken to ensure that it is alive and active among the physical forces of the proletariat, in the daily conflict of its interests. And this will not come about as a result of a sudden enlightenment from outside, from the explosive power of the idea, but only by virtue of the action that the revolutionary vanguard will be able to carry out in terms of bringing together the most sensitive and effective energies of the proletariat and the political struggle inspired by the revolutionary aims of the class.

A boycott of parliament and of elections will only come about when the course of events has historically created the conditions for a consciousness that can be translated into a willingness to take a boycott action. The boycott, for example, of the industrial apparatus of capitalism would not have gone down in history as a method of struggle if it had not had the practical possibility of being translated more or less effectively into actual action against the machine. The same applies to

the boycott of war as to the boycott of elections and parliament. It is an amateurish and impotent tactic to shout empty slogans that no one or almost no one is willing to carry out when the objective situation pushes the proletariat into the arms of the parties of parliamentary compromise.

It would not have been difficult in 1919 or 1920 to implement the boycott policy when the masses were rushing beyond bourgeois institutions towards revolutionary goals. It is very difficult to implement the tactic that allows the party to slowly ride the wave of the class movement and reach the situation of revolutionary attack with the masses, without acting on the basis of objective possibilities and returning to work in order to prepare the cadres of the class party for the fire of daily struggle, unless one wishes to adopt the theory of those who remain in passive waiting as a matter of principle.

Those who operate differently, following a pattern of principled abstentionism and allowing the masses, even the most lively and sensitive ones, to spontaneously develop their own abstentionist consciousness outside the struggle and without the active participation even in certain electoral carnivals full of political dynamism, carnivals which are the historical product of bourgeois practice and whose effectiveness is always to be measured by its continuing ability to attract the proletariat and bend it to its own ends; those who reject this form of struggle not because of a political assessment of class interests, but out of a sense of moral disgust and misunderstood revolutionary aestheticism, would show themselves to be alien to the revolutionary realism that must characterise the activity of a proletarian party today, a party forced to fight an adversary who does not hesitate to raise the banners of socialism and communism in order to better cover up the extreme necessity of defending its own class privilege. And it inevitably lends support to Lenin's argument in *"Left-Wing" Communism*.

The only way the class party can become the effective guiding body of the masses in the transition from bourgeois parliamentarianism to the dictatorship of the proletariat is through manoeuvring with the forces of revolution and not with the "bavardage" of an abstentionism worthy of being compared with what has now gone down in history under the name of parliamentary cretinism.

On the other hand, abstentionism on principle cannot be justified or substantiated by basing its critical analysis on the observation that in the phase of monopoly capitalism everything, from the economy to social and political superstructures, tends towards concentration, iron-fisted authority from above and violence, and concluding that the era of parliamentarism and electoral struggles is definitively over. It is true that we are living in the classic era of dictatorship, of both bourgeois dictatorship in the phase of extreme decadence of capitalism, and of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which is already in the making and is slowly translating itself into the consciousness of the proletariat as an essential and indispensable moment for the construction of socialism. But this does not mean that parliamentarism does not continue to play its nefarious and corrupting role, intertwining with dictatorship or operating

in its service; and the reason for the coexistence of the two methods of political rule and their mutual integration can be found in certain objective data on the uneven development of the various sectors of the capitalist economy.

If it is a sign of revolutionary maturity to be able to subject the ideas and practical conduct of an entire historical period to critical scrutiny, it is the duty of the Italian Left to re-examine, in the light of recent events, the most striking, if not the most consistent, of its theoretical and tactical positions: that of abstentionism, which the powerful, absolute and highly concentrated action of the Communist International did not allow to translate into concrete political experience.

There is indeed a strength, as well as weakness, to the arguments for abstentionism that the Italian Left presented at the Second Congress of the Communist International. The strength consists in the position taken in favour of the boycott of parliament and elections, given that this tactic was the only one possible from a Marxist point of view in the historical era of the dictatorship of the proletariat, particularly at a time when the conquest of power was an immediate goal of action. The weakness, on the other hand, consists in the failure to consider the tactics of the revolutionary party in relation to the prospects of a retreat by the proletarian masses, a decline in their unified class consciousness and a reduced capacity for struggle.

When the tactic of frontal attack is considered untimely, the proletarian party must be able to adopt that of active defence, which allows it to painstakingly rebuild and develop, day by day, the concrete grounds for a recovery.

Objectivity, however, requires us to acknowledge that the council communists, compared to abstentionists in general, have a more pronounced sense of revolutionary practicality when they place the organisation of workers' councils, or rather their active existence, as the basis for the policy of boycotting bourgeois parliamentarism. These comrades have understood that the axis of political action based on the boycott of parliament cannot be shifted into a vacuum.

However, the organisation of the workers' councils cannot be conceived and realised according to the ideal schemes and tactical and political needs of the Dutch communists, but rather along the lines of a movement aiming for power, imposed on the proletarian struggle by the revolutionary turn of the current crisis of capitalism.

To think of the workers' councils as a permanent mass organisation to be pitted against reactionary trade unions, towards which all spontaneous workers' unrest now converges, is to think idealistically and to act out of step with the times.

Yet the experience of the workers' councils is still recent, and the reasons that made their establishment and development possible are well defined.

> *"The revolutions of February and October 1917 led to the all-round development of the soviets on a nation-wide scale and to their victory in the proletarian socialist revolution. In less than two years, the international character of the soviets, the spread of this form of struggle and organisation to the world working-class movement and the historical mission of the soviets as the grave-digger, heir and successor of bourgeois*

> *parliamentarism and of bourgeois democracy in general, all became clear.*" (Lenin, *"Left-Wing" Communism*)

Although the organisation of the workers' councils in Germany did not fulfil its historical function at that time, it clearly demonstrated that it was possible because it had sprung up on the fertile ground of a revolutionary turning point and the move to the offensive by the great mass of the working class. On the other hand, and this serves as indirect historical proof, the post-Second World War period did not see the emergence of workers' councils, despite the openly reactionary action of the trade unions, which had become instruments of imperialist policy.

It is true that our party put the issue of workers' councils on the agenda at a time of great unrest among factory workers, when they, with weapons in hand, deluded themselves into thinking they could resolve their class interests and take control of their destiny by obeying the national-communist[15] suggestion of a democratic war of liberation and the destruction of fascism to be carried out within the framework of the capitalist state and without affecting the regime of private property. The offensive surge of the masses found its limits not so much in the strategic requirements of the war, which was not yet over, as in the openly counter-revolutionary conduct of the PCI. And the objective conditions that had favoured the revival of the workers' offensive, if they gave rise to affirmations of principle such as that of the workers' councils, were in no way decisive in the creation of new organs of workers' struggle.

Having thus clarified the historical phase in which workers' councils can arise and establish themselves, it is obvious that only when they are a consistent, functioning and widespread reality will the consciousness of proletarian power appear, and the revolutionary party will feel that it has the weapon for concrete action to boycott the bourgeois parliament.

But our disagreement with the council communists deepens when we examine how and when to create mass organisations, their relationship with traditional trade unions, and their constitutional inability to assume the revolutionary leadership role that historically belongs to the class party.

It seems strange that precisely in the constructive part of his theses Pannekoek indulges in a futuristic vision in which lyricism replaces dialectics, and the love of the thesis makes us forget that the history of revolutions is above all the history of understanding how objective possibilities and human material are interdependent on each other at the level of revolutionary action.

The landscape after the Second World War does not really give us grounds for lyrical flourishes when it comes to considering the conditions of the international proletariat and the real possibilities of it resuming the struggle.

Capitalism today appears overwhelmingly powerful in its attempt to organise the economy in a unified and global manner, not because it has found the means to resolve its crisis, but because it has once again been able to bend the forces of labour to its imperialist policy and its war, manoeuvring the leadership of the workers' parties with their wide-ranging influence among the masses. This has led

to the paradoxical situation in which we find the active forces of workers' politics at the heart of the process of war and reconstruction; the traditional workers' parties are now welded to the imperialist state, and the trade unions even more so than the parties themselves. And, in order to understand and implement class politics today, this salient feature of the post-war period is the fact from which we must start.

The vast majority of workers still believe in trade unions as the traditional body defending their interests. Clever corporate policies and a well-disguised use of trade union agitation for better wages or against unemployment at parliamentary and government level have reinforced this illusion. And even when particular conditions push them into spontaneous agitation, openly setting them against the trade union leadership, against the wage truce and against the policy of social peace, it is ultimately still the trade unions that are at the heart of the agitation and take the lead, with the certain and immediate result of dragging the unruly workers back and leading them docile and chastened onto the path of duty as imposed by the higher and patriotic necessity of rebuilding the national economy.

As long as workers believe in the trade unions and in the mass parties that monopolise them, a fact reflected in the general decline of the labour movement, thinking about creating a revolutionary trade union is like chasing rainbows; and in this situation, even the slogan of destroying the trade unions is simply a polemical stance that goes no further than the usual propaganda.

First and foremost, it is up to the incurable crisis that is breaking the back of decadent capitalism to bring to fruition the causes underlying the slow transformation of the collective consciousness of the masses in an anti-imperialist direction. And this is the fundamental, dialectical condition from which will spring the drive towards the construction of new mass organisations capable of fulfilling the historic task of bringing all the forces of labour into the sphere of action of the class party and the revolutionary offensive.

We do not know when this will happen, but we know that it will happen and that this is the direction of our daily work. In the meantime, we must not turn our backs on reality, however harsh and bitter it may be, but work within it, leveraging the best aspects to create, alongside ideological and political premises, physical and, where possible, organisational premises in expectation of the resumption of class conflict. Walking with the forces, however scarce, that currently express the class divide; broadening the scope of their influence; leaping with them to the forefront of spontaneous unrest; orienting them towards the general and political struggle of the proletariat, working with the material available and with the modest possibilities offered by the current historical course of capitalism; this is what it means to work along the lines of revolutionary Marxism.

The council communists are following this line but have allowed themselves to be carried away by facile constructive euphoria, devising a kind of revolutionary *élan vital* that would originate in the spontaneous uprisings of the masses, pass through the experience of the strike committees and their generalisation into a

unified movement, and culminate in the era of the workers' councils.

We believe that it is a virtue of the revolutionary to know what needs to be done in a given situation, but woe betide the revolutionary who ignores or pretends to ignore what should not be done in the same situation. And what should not be done today is to make empty theoretical plans, given the obvious impossibility of being able to implement them in practice.

Certainly, the spontaneous unrest among the masses that has occurred and will continue to occur outside and against their own union leadership is a new and interesting experience, albeit still in its early stages and extremely sporadic in nature. But only if their leadership is replaced by a body firmly and solidly anchored within the workplace and the union, with workers who may or may not be union members, and under the stimulating action of internationalist factory groups led by the class party, can spontaneous unrest be channelled and strengthened on the level of revolutionary struggle.

However, if strike committees are the result of a temporary agreement between representatives of various, and almost always too diverse and generic, trade union oppositions and inefficient and ineffective political groups, when not directly linked to imperialist politics, as in the case of the Trotskyists, they are ultimately nothing more than opportunistic organisational expedients; they exist without a strong guiding idea and without method, almost by force of inertia, during the ascendant phase of agitation, and are swept away by the abrupt return of the reactionary trade union leadership. And every experience based on this guideline generally ends in failure. It must therefore be agreed that the workers' councils will in no case be the result of a sum of negative experiences.

We believe that it would distort the task that the history of revolutionary struggles has entrusted to the workers' councils to consider them to be, in the same way as the trade unions, capable of resuming their normal function, perhaps under the banner of a revolutionary postulation.

Assuming that the organisation of workers' councils could, at the current stage of the workers' movement, take the place of traditional trade unions, it would not achieve much more or better results, for the reason that it is not the particular organisation that creates the conditions for revolutionary struggle, but rather the change in the objective situation in a revolutionary sense that will give the organisation the opportunity to operate and achieve class conquest. It would move between theoretical abstraction and the reality of trade union life, which is short-sighted, contingent, demand-making and essentially reformist, with the sole result of discrediting in the consciousness of the proletariat the future possibilities of an organisation born out of the crucible of workers' struggles, seriously undermining the role entrusted to it by the recent history of the revolutionary achievements of the proletariat.

The trade union, as it stands, represents a historical and vital necessity for the imperialist state; therefore, it will live as long as this state exists, and will be destroyed with its destruction. Only then will the workers be able to take their destiny into their own hands, but Comrade Pannekoek can rest assured that they will no longer be so naive as to dabble in

corporate and factory democracy, but will act on the basis of revolutionary violence, because everything from the state to the trade union, from the church to the factory, as secular encrustations of capitalism, will have to pass under the steamroller of communist dictatorship.[16]

Onorato Damen
June-July 1948

Notes:

(8) In the Netherlands in 1907, a group of Marxist revolutionaries around David Wijnkoop emerged within the Social Democratic Workers' Party (SDAP). They published the paper *De Tribune* (hence the moniker, the Tribunists) and opposed the reformist party leadership of Pieter Jelles Troelstra. The Tribunists were soon expelled and instead founded the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1909. In 1918, the SDP renamed itself the Communist Party of Holland (CPH) and in 1919 affiliated to the Communist International. Pannekoek and Gorter both contributed to *De Tribune*, but they split from the CPH in 1920.

(9) In the 1960s and 70s the term *operaismo* (workerism) became associated with groups like the Quaderni Rossi and Lotta Continua. Writing in the 1940s, Damen uses it to refer to the Dutch-German Communist Left.

(10) Lenin published *"Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder* in 1920, which was then distributed to delegates at the Second Congress of the Communist International. In 1921 Gorter replied with his *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin*.

(11) Georges Sorel (1847-1922) was a French thinker who influenced some of the syndicalist movement. He rejected parliamentary politics in favour of violent revolution by means of the general strike.

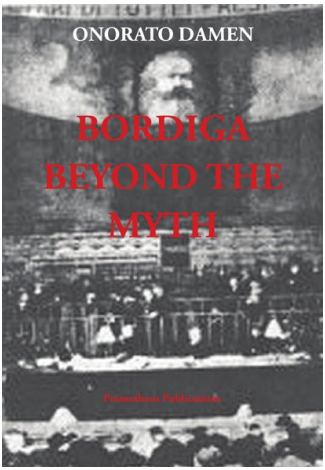
(12) Karl Liebknecht (1871-1919) was on the left of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). In 1912 he was elected to the Reichstag, where he publicly opposed attempts to increase military spending. Following the outbreak of the war, he attempted to continue his anti-war opposition despite pressure from the SPD leadership. In the parliamentary session of 2 December 1914, Liebknecht was the only deputy not to approve the new war loan bill. Together with Rosa Luxemburg he became a key figure in the Spartacus League. On 1 May 1916 he led an anti-war demonstration in Berlin and was charged with treason for shouting "Down with the war! Down with the government!". His father, the socialist politician Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826-1900), had previously also been charged with treason for publicly opposing the Franco-Prussian War in 1870.

(13) In October 1923, members of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) entered coalition governments with the SPD in Saxony and Thuringia. This was a step in preparation of an insurrection that then failed to materialise, as the SPD threatened to walk out of the coalition if a general strike was declared. Soon government troops occupied Saxony and dissolved the government there by force, while in Thuringia the government resigned voluntarily. The whole episode was an attempt to put into practice the new tactics of "united front" and "workers' government" advocated by the Communist International. See also Damen on the "German October": https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2024-01-12/the-german-october-and-the-origins-of-trotsky-s-opposition

(14) At the time both Damen and Bordiga used the term "Leninist" as synonym for "revolutionary", since they did not attribute the counter-revolution to Lenin personally. Today we tend not to use the label since it creates more confusion than clarity. See: https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2024-01-21/lenin-and-leninism

(15) i.e. Stalinist

(16) Here of course Damen means the dictatorship of the proletariat, not the dictatorship of the party. See, again, the *1952 Platform* of the PCInt: https://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2020-03-16/political-platform-of-the-internationalist-communist-party-1952



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Bordiga Beyond the Myth
Onorato Damen

Amadeo Bordiga led the fight to form the Communist Party of Italy as a "section of the Third International" in 1921. No sooner was this achieved than he found himself leading the fight of the Communist Left in Italy against the same International's abandonment of revolutionary politics. Arrested and imprisoned whilst awaiting trial in 1923, Bordiga opted to stand aside from the party's leadership in Italy allowing free reign for Comintern manoeuvres to introduce a 'centrist' leadership under Gramsci. Even so, as Fascism took hold the Communist Left —in both exile and fascist gaols— did not disappear. Bordiga however did. He retreated from political activity for almost 2 decades. The significance of this volume is that it demonstrates that the "Italian Left" was not just Bordiga but a living movement that has responded to the reality of the class war throughout its history

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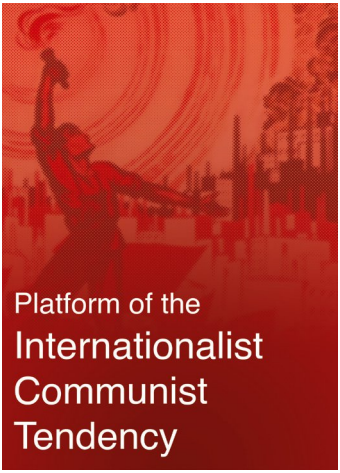
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The **Communist Workers' Organisation** (CWO) is part of the **Internationalist Communist Tendency** (ICT). Our tendency came into existence as a result of a joint initiative with the **Internationalist Communist Party** (PCInt – Battaglia Comunista) in Italy. Formed during the Second World War in 1943, the PCInt condemned both sides as imperialist. Its roots go back to the Italian Communist Left which had fought the degeneration of the Communist International and the Stalinisation imposed on all its member parties. Today there are ICT affiliates in several countries.

We are internationalists. We believe that the interests of the exploited are the same all over the world, and that communism cannot be achieved in one country, a myth peddled by Stalinism. Stalinism was never communism but a particular form of capitalism, state capitalism. After 1917 the economic blockade of the Soviet Union and the failure of the world revolution in the West meant that the revolution was transformed into its opposite, eventually becoming an imperialist bloc that would collapse after only seventy years. We are opposed to all (Stalinist, Trotskyist, Maoist) claims that state capitalism in whatever form is socialism.

We aim to be a political reference point for the working class, first of all for those who are tired of the unions, all unions. This does not mean giving up on the fight to defend immediate interests (wages, hours, work rates, etc.). But the unions are now a tool to control the class struggle and manage the labour force on behalf of capital. Today, any self-organised struggle has to go outside of and against the unions. However, rank and file unions are a blunt instrument for workers. Even when they win a particular battle if they settle into a permanent existence they must accept the legal and economic framework imposed by the state. Any attempt to maintain a permanent body to defend workers' immediate economic interests will fail.

The only permanent body the working class can establish today is the political organisation, which is not only possible but essential. The starting point for this must be recognising that the general interest of the class lies in getting rid of capitalism. This is only possible through a revolution, i.e. the overthrow of the existing state and establishment of a new form of political power by the proletariat. The road to revolution does not mean the futile attempt to win control of the existing state via elections to parliaments or local governments which are means for the capitalist class to exercise its rule. History has shown us that the forum of our "democracy", the bodies of power of the revolution, will be the workers' councils (or soviets) – mass meetings in which delegates will be entrusted with specific mandates and will be recallable at any time. But these potentially revolutionary organisations will be undermined by capitalist forces from within if they do not have a clear programme aimed at the abolition of exploitation and, therefore, the elimination of classes, for a society of "freely associated producers" who work together to directly meet human needs.

The programme is not the creation of any single theorist or one organisation. It is the outcome of the key lessons learned from past and present struggles and as such defines the practical way forward for the working class as a whole. Without a clear political compass the working class movement will be prey to all kinds of capitalist tricks and illusions. Thus political clarification and reorganisation today are vital for a revolutionary party to come into being which is in a position to win over the working class to the revolutionary programme. This is not a party of government that would replace the class and its class-wide organs of power, but a party of agitation and political guidance on the basis of that programme.

We are for the party, but we are not that party or its only embryo. Our task is to participate in its construction, trying to link immediate demands to the historical programme; communism.

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No 61 Autumn/Winter 2022

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AURORA

Capitalist Crisis: Survival of the Richest

Months of soaring inflation and stalling wages are the latest effects of the crisis inherent to the capitalist system. The ruling class' attacks on our living and working conditions are just one more attempt to make us pay for it. As winter approaches, the havoc wreaked by the failures of the system show no signs of letting up.

Workers Getting the Worst of a Bad Lot

The rise in the prices of basic food and drink items has been steady and unrelenting. In the 12 months leading up to September 2022 they have increased by 14.6% – the sharpest since 1980 – with every single month seeing a new increase. In the same period, the cost of motor fuel rose by 26.5%, while transport costs rose by 10.9%. Water, energy and housing related costs rose by 20.2% – although "luckily", we could be set to save untold amounts on gas and electric costs over winter when, according to the National Grid, the supply of energy could fall short of demand by up to a sixth, meaning potential "managed blackouts" in January and February.

As more households face the choice to "eat or heat" over the winter, already over 90% of food banks report an increase in the need for their services since the start of the year. Homelessness is set to continue its exponential rise (having increased by 19% in the first three months of 2022 alone). As costs of goods, rent and bills rise for businesses too, the bosses will continue to shift the brunt of the consequences onto the shoulders of workers. Scrimping on health and safety, forcing workers to come to work sick with debilitating and contagious illnesses to make up the numbers of deliberately understaffed workforces, and knowingly putting lives at risk by greenlighting unsafe products.

The effects of the bosses' flagrant recklessness with our health and safety both at home and at work are not hard to predict. Vicious cycles of infection and reinfection with Covid as well as flu and other seasonal illnesses, the overwhelming of hospitals, and the soaring rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide that are bound to accompany increased instability, debt, and financial hardship paint a very bleak picture indeed for the winter ahead.

The ruling class have suggested that we put on jumpers and take shorter showers, that actually we can out food with mould on it, that if you're depressed it's "ok to talk", and that in fact a good blackout might be just the thing we need to beach the "work shy" from their sofas and get the lights on for the economy. Meanwhile, they fight amongst themselves for the privilege of steering their sinking ship. But as a class we are becoming ever-increasingly aware that what we need is not a new captain with new insulting "solutions" that keep their order intact.

A Crisis with a History

The so-called 'cost of living crisis' is not simply due to rising inflation. The pandemic and the war in Ukraine have only unravelled a crisis decades in the making. Through technological advances, outsourcing, deskilling, and austerity the ruling class has been able to continue squeezing profits out of the working class. But ever since the 1970s we have seen cuts in pensions and social benefits, the erosion of protection and jobs dismantled and wages as a percentage of GDP dropping. Investment in 'the real economy' gave way to financial speculation based on ever-more ingenious ways of multiplying fictitious capital, especially 'slicing and dicing' mortgage loans. The crash of 2007/8 did for a few big financial names but without state intervention, homelessness and joblessness would have been worse than after the 1929 stock market crash. As it was, a whole generation of workers had their eyes opened: they had been told capitalism and crashes were a thing of the past. In fact it was only a sign of things to come. Now, already up to our ears in debt and working in precarious jobs with no future worth thinking about, we are facing the longest recession since records began.

Over the last fifty years workers' resistance to the capitalist crisis has been largely on defensive grounds, each time ultimately thwarted by the bosses and their state. Will this time be different?

Class Struggle is Back on the Agenda!

The capitalist crisis is intensifying and with it come the inevitable attacks on the working class. Cost of living and fuel protests have broken out in more than 90 countries already and the UK is no exception here. Nearly 2 million workers (one in sixteen) are expected to be balloted for strike action in the coming months. The struggle for wages to keep up with inflation is on. Even before the pandemic, which killed more than 200,000 in the UK, finally eased up, and the Covid-19 restrictions were lifted in February 2021, the first signs of the coming resistance were making their appearance.

Strikes and Protests

In January there were strikes by scaffolders calling for better pay. In February there were strikes over pensions at schools and universities, and small protests about the cost of living and the desperate situation in the NHS. In March, the London Tube strike began over threats to jobs and pensions, and there were protests in support of sacked P&O workers. April saw strikes by oil refinery workers over an insulting pay offer. In May, postal workers went on strike as they had their wages frozen for the previous year, followed by a wave of wildcat strikes. Refuse collectors in Welwyn Hatfield, construction workers in Hull, offshore oil workers in the North Sea, workers at a food plant in Bury, all took matters into their own hands and did not wait to go through the official process. In June, there were more strikes in the Royal Mail, a vibrotic campaign to discredit striking workers. In July, BT workers started their strikes, the first nationwide action at the company for 35 years, there were more strikes on the buses, and further action on the Royal Mail and on the railways. In August, council workers went on strike, and there was another wave of wildcat action, this time by Amazon workers at various sites, and contract workers, including scaffolders and maintenance workers, at various refineries and chemical plants. In September, offshore oil workers in the North Sea, despite condemnation from both the unions and the employers, went on strike again, organised by their own strike committee. That month there were also strikes by dockers at Felixstowe and Liverpool ports (with impressive 24hr pickets). Finally, October saw the continuation of many of the previously mentioned strikes, and the resignation of Liz Truss as her government collapsed following the unveiling of the disastrous mini-budget for the rich. And more is set to come this winter, as rising energy bills truly hit home.

Workers Can Pose their Own Alternative

Appeals to the capitalist state to resolve this crisis are bound to end up in disillusionment. All over the world the ruling class parties, whether left or right wing, are out of ideas – the political chaos in the UK is not unique, it is only a symptom of a system in freefall. The ruling class has only two things on offer: more attacks on workers to boost their profits and, ultimately, war. Dreams of a return to the past, of decent wages and welfare of the post-war boom, are in the current crisis just that, dreams. So what is to be done?

The current resistance is an important starting point. But if we let the ruling class isolate us sector by sector, workplace by workplace, we will lose. The offensive of the bosses, who have money and the law on their side, is on a global scale and so too. We can already see examples of that. When unions in the North Sea were reluctant to take action, workers set up their own strike committee to lead the way. When ships were rerouted from Liverpool to break the strike, dockers in Southampton refused to handle them. It is this kind of self-organisation and solidarity that can level the playing field and act beyond the limiting framework of the unions (which, as we saw during the Queen's funeral, can suspend our actions without even consulting the membership). On picket lines across the country the chant "the workers united will never be defeated" is resonating, but it needs to become more than a slogan. And if looking to the government to save us is a dead-end, then workers need their own political alternative. Without such a vision, we are looking at a future of gradual immiseration on a planet of collapsing societies and ecosystems. We believe that only in a global workers' revolution, that sweeps all borders, can economic crises, wars, and climate disasters be averted. To that end, we are building a political organisation fit for the task, a reference point for the global working class. If workers play by the rules (set up by the bosses) or delegate their power away (to parliamentary parties) this better future can never come.

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