

# WORKERS VOICE

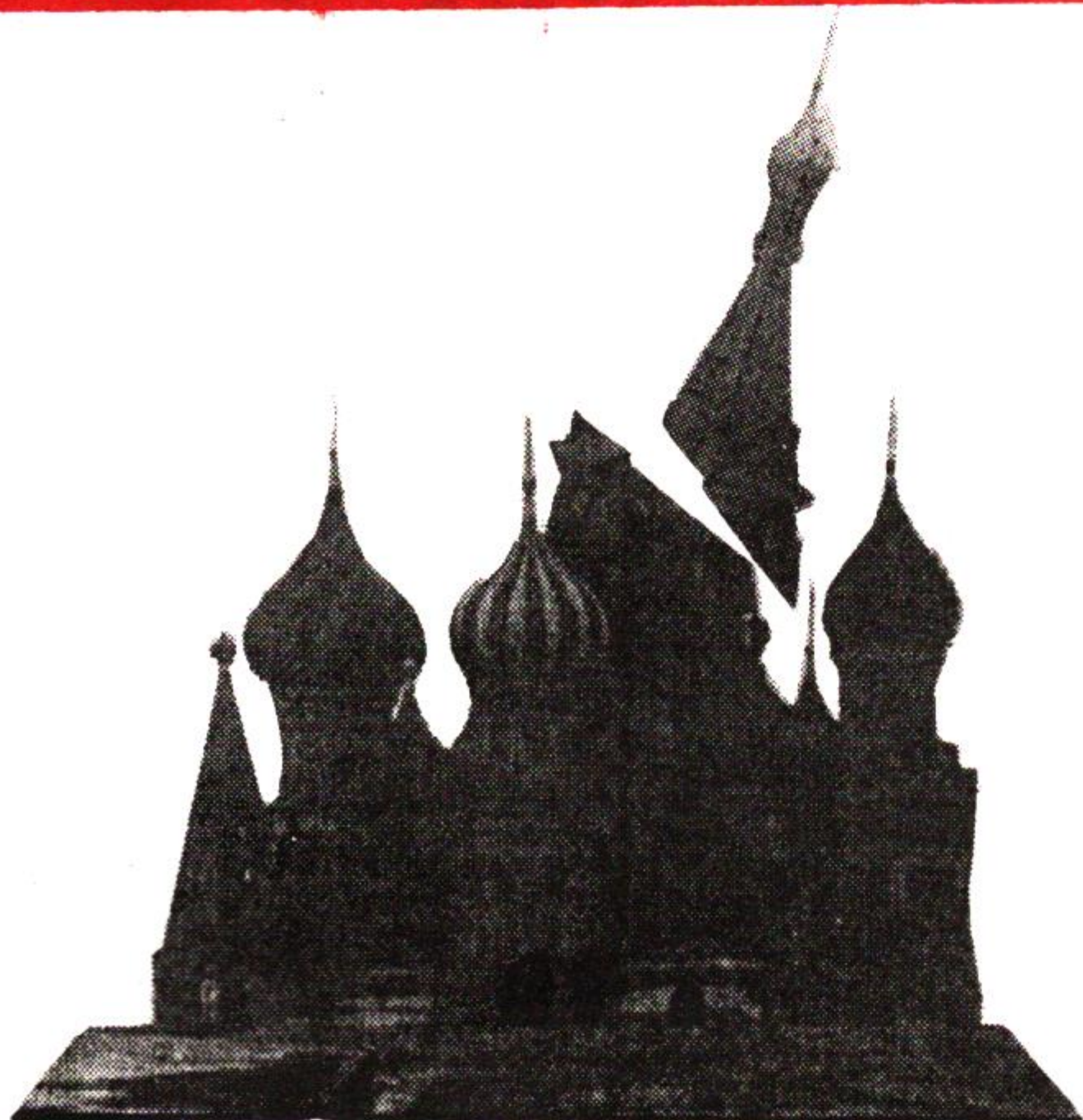
COMMUNIST  
WORKERS  
ORGANISATION

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## CAPITALIST CRISIS DEEPENS IN USSR

The present power struggle inside the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union reflect a much deeper crisis of the state capitalist system. Gorbachev's re-call of the Central Committee, the demotion of old hands like Ligachev and his side kick, Chebrikov, the ex-head of the KGB, the dumping of Gromyko and up to 50% of the present Central Committee is only a reflection of the deepening economic crisis in the Soviet Union.

### ECONOMIC CRISIS

Gorbachev knew all about the dismal economic statistics. He knew that GNP had slowed from an annual growth rate of 5% in the seventies to about 3 in the eighties. He knew that the ration of unsold goods to those produced had risen from 13% in 1965 to almost 80% in the 1980s. He knew too that Japan had overtaken the USSR in industrial output and that the export of technology derived goods to OECD countries had slumped from 27% in 1973 to 9% in 1982. After all this was why Gorbachev had been chosen to clean out the Augean stables of the Brezhnev era.

What Gorbachev does not seem to have realised was just how angry were the working class of the various Soviet Republics. Instead of hailing him as a potential liberator they have simply regarded "perestroika" as one more excuse for the shops being emptier than before. In this they are, of course profoundly correct. What Gorbachev has realised is that "glasnost" has opened up a

new willingness to openly criticise the regime but has done nothing to address the material problems of food shortages faced by the Russian workers. This is why after his trip to Siberia where he seems to have discovered the food queues and the tediousness of economic life in the USSR for the first time. The similarity to Russian Tsars of the period before the revolution has not gone unnoticed. And like the Russian Tsars Gorbachev has lashed out at his false advisers. This explains the latest purge in the higher echelons of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

### THE FOOD CRISIS

Gorbachev has carried out his purge with some political skill. Having got rid of most of the conservatives who supported Ligachev he has neatly turned the tables on him by giving him the Ministry of Agriculture. This is not only a demotion, since his previous responsibility for "ideology" allowed him to speak on every issue, but also puts Ligachev in the traditional graveyard of politics in the USSR. Until now Ligachev has been biding his time and waiting for economic failure to undermine Gorbachev as it once did Khrushchev.

Since Gorbachev himself identified the food crisis as the country's "sorest point" last July, Ligachev will have to carry the can for any future problems, especially if he tries to hold up reforms such as the introduction of tenant farming which Gorbachev wants. This is also a particularly good time to make the transfer since this years harvest was the best for many years (and coincides with a drought in the USA and Canada). But this is unlikely to continue since the structural problems of Soviet agriculture go much deeper. Already \$1000 billions have been ploughed into agriculture since 1979 but production has only risen by 25% and productivity is still falling in some areas.

Ligachev thus finds himself in a no-win situation. If agriculture improves Gorbachev will get the credit, if it continues to fail Ligachev will get the blame.

### POLITICAL CRISIS

At the same time the economic crisis is fueling a series of political crises with nationalist elements able to mobilise thousands in demonstrations for greater autonomy. Despite Gorbachev's promises 200,000 Armenians still demonstrate every day in Yerevan for the return of Nagorno-Karabakh. In Estonia and the other Baltic provinces taken over by Stalin in 1939 there have been even more rumblings of discontent. Gorbachev believes he can buy them all off by a better economic performance and by offering greater autonomy. If he doesn't he could be facing demands for outright secession. This was another reason for the urgent dumping of the Ligachev faction.

However Gorbachev's reforms in the political field are little but window dressing. Talk of a return to Soviet power is simply window dressing since elections will be closely supervised and the new delegates will be elected by Party representatives and not by the population as a whole.

It is not therefore surprising that Gorbachev's proposed reforms should have the enthusiastic support of Thatcher. The creation of a more open economy would make the USSR susceptible to imports of high technology from the West and the EEC countries would be falling over themselves to get in there in an even greater degree than they do already.

### AND FOR THE WORKING CLASS?

Gorbachev has already hinted what is in store  
continued on page 2

### GIBRALTAR

## STATE MURDER IS O.K. - OFFICIAL

The verdict handed down by a jury in a British Crown Colony can come as no surprise to anyone. The finding that it was "lawful killing" for the SAS to gun down three unarmed people in broad daylight clearly shows what British democracy (like all states in the world today) rests on - naked terror. We have no sympathy for the IRA which is just as anti-working class as Thatcher. Like the British Government the IRA rule West Belfast, Derry, etc. by terror - kneecappings, tar and feathers and (like the British State) murder are its sanctions. The murder of the three IRA members themselves is of as little interest to the working class as any war between capitalist and imperialist gangs.

What does interest us is the exposure of the hypocrisy of the so-called democratic British State.

To any but the most jaundiced observer the killings on Gibraltar were an act of premeditated murder. The Thames Television programme "Death on the Rock" revealed that the three would-be terrorists were unarmed, had not planted a bomb (which was mysteriously only found in Spain three days after the shootout) and were leaving the colony on foot. The British State claims that they were frightened the victims would detonate a radio-controlled bomb are not convincing. The car which was thought to be a bomb was in a deserted street (it was a Sunday) and

too screened to receive a radio message. And all the witnesses agreed all the would-be terrorists had bullets pumped into them (sixteen in the case of one of them) as they lay severely wounded.

Make no mistake this was capital punishment without the benefits of the much-vaunted capitalist "justice" of a trial.

And remember this. Given the lack of accurate information that the SAS had it could have been anyone they were gunning down that Sunday afternoon.

And the verdict makes it more likely that it will be anyone next time. This is because

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## POSTAL WORKERS FIGHT THE BOSSES AND THE UNIONS

The postal strike may be over but the struggle in the sorting offices has not completely died away. The strike has left the same bitterness which provoked it. For over a year before the September postal workers had engaged in a series of wildcat strikes which had cost the post office an estimated 70,000 days lost. Naturally the bourgeois press made few, if any references to these strikes in an attempt to ensure that other workers would not take up the struggle. Thus until September sorting offices tended to strike on their own or in succession rather than together. Most of the strikes were caused by management attempts to introduce casual workers at times of so-called peak demand. Such workers were obviously recruited to cut labour costs but particularly in the South East were also an attempt to maintain deliveries in a situation of staff shortages and high staff turnover. High staff turnover is hardly surprising given the conditions that postal workers face. For a six day week of approximately 43 hours, normally starting at 5.00 a.m. for a miserly take home pay of £85 it is not surprising that no-one wants to do the job. As the postal "service" made £200 millions in profit last year it is certainly in a position to make those conditions better.

It was, in fact, the latest "gimmick" by the Post Office to recruit permanent staff that started the dispute. The introduction of special pay supplements, ranging from £7.50 to £20, for new recruits in the South East meant that the full-time staff found themselves being undermined on two fronts. Firstly, the gradual extension of "casualisation" through the industry meant that the numbers in full-time employment were beginning to decline, thus posing a threat to both working conditions and job security. Secondly, and more insultingly, it became clear that the new recruits were earning more than some of the workers who were training them. This two-pronged attack by the bosses antagonised postal workers throughout the whole country. In the face of wildcat strikes the UCW (Union of Communications Workers) found itself in the situation of having to call a one-day strike to try and cool down the situation which was rapidly getting out of its control.

The union-controlled one-day strike passed off peacefully and the union described it as a "warning shot across the bows". The UCW hoped for class peace, but the following day the post-office bosses, both nationally and locally, decided to take on their workforce once and for all. In this, they hoped to emulate the success of their counterparts in the mining, printing and ferry industries, who, over the past few years, have defeated their respective workforces. In some parts of the country, management set out deliberately to punish the most militant workers. Many workers, for example, were greeted on the Thursday morning with a letter saying

"The Post Office is not prepared to tolerate any further disruption to normal working. Any failure by you to heed this final warning will result in you being suspended from work without pay until such time as the Post Office management is satisfied that you are prepared to work normally."

This was tantamount to locking the workers out in order to get an effective no-strike deal. The effect was immediate. Large numbers of postal workers walked out. In other areas, the management drafted in huge numbers of casual staff in order, they claimed, to clear the backlog.

In fact, they also claimed that they brought in only 500 extra casuals nationally. But, in Birmingham, they provoked a walk-out

by demanding an extra 500 at the city's main sorting-office alone. Similarly, the Post Office started redirecting mail from strike-bound offices to others which were working normally. Before long, these were picketted out to join the strike. Within a week, the postal system nationwide was totally paralysed.

The demands raised by the postal workers were mainly defensive - 1) no more casuals; and 2) an end to the bonus payments. Although some casuals refused to scab (for example, at the Mount Pleasant office in London), many were bussed in (as in Liverpool, for example) with police protection to carry out a limited sorting operation. Nevertheless, the distribution system remained totally shut down during the whole length of the strike. Although declaring the strike official, the UCW soon showed its true colours by refusing to give out strike pay. At the same time, after prolonged negotiations with the PO bosses, it called on its members to return to work having reached an agreement with the bosses to hold talks regarding the issue of recruitment in the South East and the use of casual labour. Before long, work restarted in some parts of the country. However, in other parts, including Liverpool and Coventry, workers accused the union of selling them out in that nothing concrete was achieved. In fact, when you consider that the union has agreed to allow management to continue the pay supplements whilst the talks take place, it can be seen clearly that nothing has been achieved despite solid support for the strike.

This strike differed from the recent major strikes such as the miners, printers and seamen for which the bosses had prepared themselves and which they provoked once their preparations were complete. The bosses were not prepared for the total breakdown of the postal system and after a week were demanding an end to the strike.

Despite the strong position the workers were in, the union ended the strike for the promise of talks - a complete capitulation which workers at the main sorting offices refused to accept by staying out. Where the recruitment of scabs and police violence had failed, where the private couriers (e.g. TNT) had failed, the union stepped in to break the strike and save the bosses' bacon. This is because the unions are fundamentally on the same side as the bosses. Their aim, illustrated in this strike, is to be incorporated into the management of the capitalist system. Although the Tories reject this aim and are kicking them out of government bodies, this will never make them fight for the workers. This was shown in the seamen's strike where the fines imposed by the courts, instead of inspiring support for the seamen's cause as the Dover seamen expected, made the NUS grovel and capitulate. These two strikes together illustrate the complete uselessness of the unions to the workers; where workers are paralysing a section of the economy and hurting the bosses, the unions capitulate in the hope of being given power, where the bosses are mounting a prepared attack and the unions present position and capital assets are threatened they capitulate also.

Today workers cannot win strikes without taking them out of the control of the unions and then spreading the strike to other workers. Instead of the negative demands of the UCW the strike should have been fought around the demands for: "a decent pay increase for all Post Office workers" and "Better working conditions for all Post Office workers".

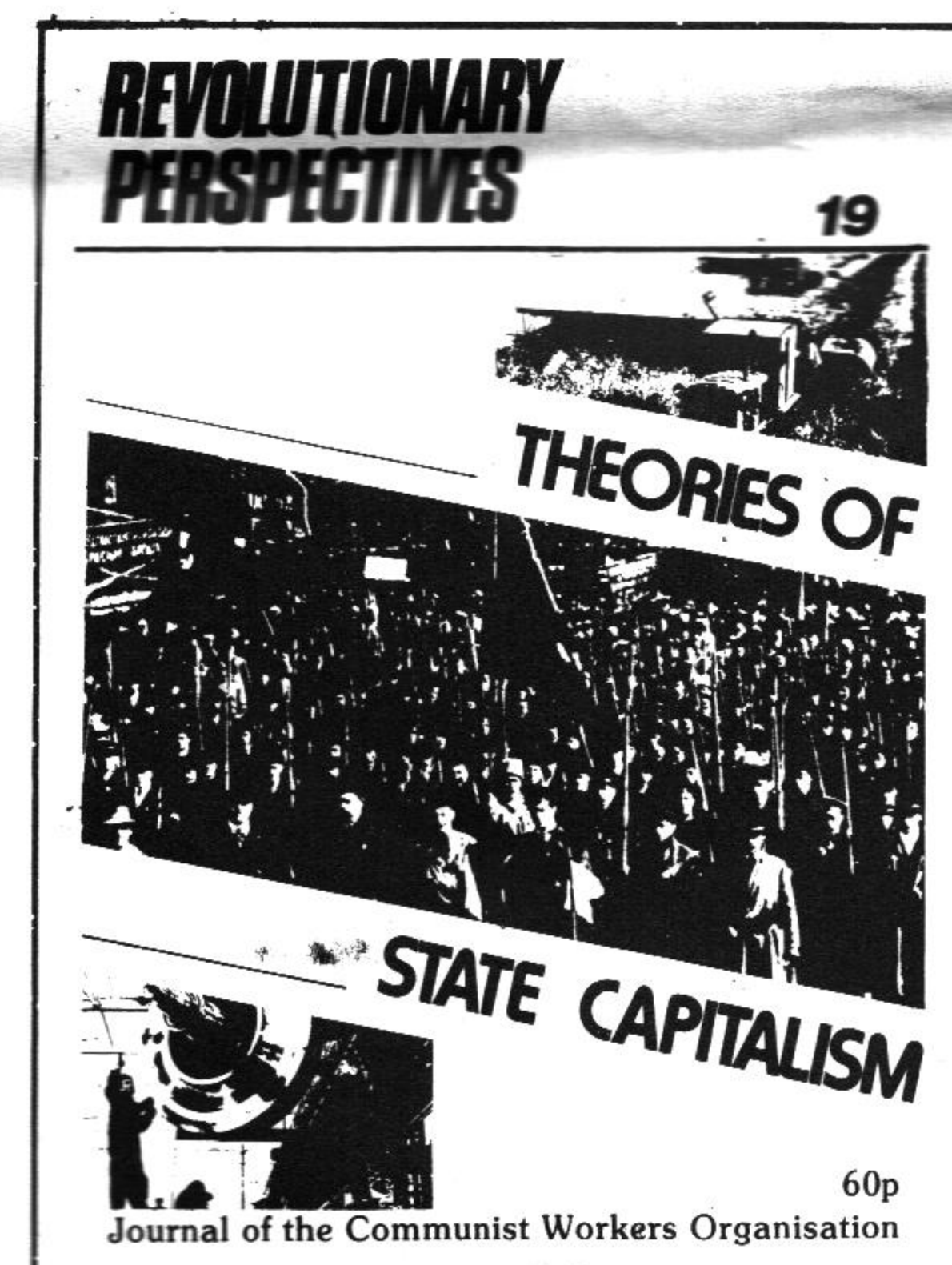
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## CAPITALIST CRISIS DEEPENS IN USSR

for them. greater labour discipline on the shopfloor (in the name of productivity), the loss of job security and piece-rate wage systems. In short an increase in exploitation. Gorbachev has even announced that unemployment will return as a deliberate scourge to increase labour discipline. Those who argue that the Soviet Union is anything else but capitalist will have to explain how the Gorbachev "revolution" has taken place in a so-called workers state. In fact what we see is that the crisis of restructuring the economy which has been forced on the states of the West has now, a little late fallen on the USSR. Gorbachev's role is to get the Soviet working class to accept it. On this his future rule depends.

For more detailed analysis of the points raised in this article see COMMUNIST REVIEW 6 "Gorbachev's Restructuring of Russian Capitalism" and WORKERS VOICE 42 and 43.

## AND...



The Russian economy explained  
£1.00 p&p

## Dialogue with our readers

Revolutionary publications differ from their bourgeois equivalents in that they are not vehicles for passive consumption. Whilst we receive many letters requesting publications, few develop political points or criticisms. The Editorial Board of Workers' Voice is anxious to widen the debate reproduced within these columns as part of the process of building a kernel of political clarity in Britain. Help us in this work by sending us your comments and criticisms.





## DISCUSSION

# MAY '68 A RE-EVALUATION

## INTRODUCTION

We are publishing here a discussion article which emerged from our review of the events of May '68. It is part of the preparations for our Annual General Meeting which will be held in a few weeks time. Originally we had intended to publish it in amended form after the AGM debate but we now feel it would be instructive to publish it as part of a living debate about where revolutionaries stand today.

One discussion involving about half the membership has already been held and the author has already accepted some modifications to the explanation of the

process of change between periods of revolution and counter-revolution. At the same time there are a number of reservations about the way in which it presents the question of state capitalism. Together with the "Theses on Thatcherism" (published after our last AGM) the text will form the basis of the discussion of the CWO's perspectives over the next twelve months. Obviously we think the issues go beyond the debate of a single organisation. We have already received some published responses to the "Theses on Thatcherism" so we hope this text will provoke further debate. A report of the discussions of the AGM will be published in the next issue of Workers Voice and further texts will be developed later.

## FRANCE MAY '68

France, May 68: A La Recherche du Temps Perdu: A Discussion Article.

The republication in Workers Voice 40 of an article originally written in 1978 on the events of May 68, represents a missed opportunity to re-open a discussion on their historical significance. The meaning of events is not fixed, and changes with the perspective of time. Thus, given the very different balance of class forces from 1978-88, to that of 1968-78, it is unlikely that we are not obliged to challenge the interpretation of May that formerly held sway, both in our organisation, and in wider political circles.

May 68 was undeniably of great political significance. It was a renewed, and massive, demonstration of the centrality of the working class in the historical process and a blow against all theories of "embourgeoisification". It demonstrated clearly the role of the socialist, communist and trade union forces as part of the political apparatus of the bourgeoisie, aiming at deflecting and recuperating the class struggle. It (combined with other issues such as the Vietnam War) brought whole new layers of people - particularly youth - into political activity, and some of these were to find their way into a re-enforcement of the weak forces of the communist left. All these things are undeniable, and not open to question. It is another interpretation - not the historical significance, but the meta-historical significance - of May 68, which is now open to question. Let us briefly summarise this interpretation before we go on to criticise it.

After the revolutionary wave at the end of the First World War, which led to the establishment, and then destruction, of proletarian power in Russia, began a long period of counter revolution, which outlasted the depression, the second imperialist war and the rebuilding and expansion of the capitalist economy in the period of post war "prosperity". May 68 was seen by many (ourselves included) as the end of this period of counter revolution, and the opening up of the beginnings of a new revolutionary era, a new period where the issues of the class struggle were to be decisively posed: war or revolution. The rapid escalation of "France-style" conflicts in many countries (Italy, Britain, etc) as well as the onset of the overt crisis of capitalism with the "dollar crisis" in 1970 gave additional weight to an outlook that saw the perspectives for the future as being very clearly delineated. We are not saying that this outlook was everywhere held mechanically, nor in so schematic a form as we give it below. But broadly speaking, across all ups and downs, counter-tendencies and exceptions, the course of history was seen as being indelibly stamped by the following future characteristics:



Confronting the State in '68

1. There would be a massive intensification of the economic crisis, and accompanying this an extension of state capitalism everywhere. Such a prognosis was confirmed by the fall in industrial output 1973-4 (the first since 1933), the near bankruptcy of Britain and Italy in the mid 1970s and the rash of nationalisations which marked government policies everywhere in the 1970s. Economically the course of events after May 68, for at least a decade, confirmed the apocalyptic view given above.

2. In parallel with the above (but not mechanically) the curve of the class struggle would ascend: despite setbacks the tendency of the period was towards ever more decisive confrontations between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Apocalypse, if not now, then quite soon! Who can deny that the class battles of the decade after 68 appeared to confirm to the last detail such an analysis? The litany of heroic battles from Portugal to Argentina, from Spain to Britain all pointed unequivocally towards more decisive battles ahead.

3. Again in a dialectical way, not simplistically, the conditions for the growth of revolutionary organisations and the eventual formation of the proletarian party would be laid. Regroupments, recruitment, confrontations would lead to a situation where the political forces of the working class would be able to intervene in the class battles of the epoch and have an influential role. And in the 1970s, with all their confusions and inadequacies, there was a proliferation of new groups within the proletarian camp, and an increase in the strength of these which had survived from a previous period. These groups began to assume organisational tasks, as opposed to purely theoretical ones, although they still remained marginal in influence within the class.

Thus for a decade or so, the confirmation of

this perspective for the course of history was almost uncanny. However, it is now clear that the 1970s were the "epoch of illusion" and - if we can borrow the phrase of the ICC, but give it a different meaning - that the 1980s are indeed the "years of truth". And the truth is that we are not living in a revolutionary period. Let us look at how events have developed in the crisis, the class struggle and the political camp in the 80s. Again, we schematise, since such a form best suits the provocation of discussion.

1. The crisis has certainly worsened, especially in the depth of the 80-83 recession. Yet capitalism has been able to ride out even such shocks as the international debt crisis and the stock market crash of 87. In contrast to the statification of the 70s, the 80s have seen widespread trends towards privatisation, "free market" economics, etc. The crisis has now become normality, the modus operandi of the capitalist system. Devaluations via proxy wars and restructuring in the heartlands has eased the threat of a capitalist collapse. Capitalism faces neither recovery nor collapse, but a period of depression punctuated by shocks.

2. With rule-proving exceptions, the 80s have been a decade of defeats for the international working class. A decade of the crushing of massive upheavals (e.g. Poland) and a war of attrition elsewhere which has resulted in a "productivity miracle" in most advanced countries as capitalism has restructured the productive apparatus. Not only has the advance guard of the class been crushed, but the class has undergone extensive decomposition, and absolute poverty has been marginalised to the young, old, sick, unemployed etc. Despite flurries here and there, the conditions for a mass revival of the class struggle - and still less a revolutionary upheaval - do not exist.

3. And what of the vanguard? What if war or revolution were on the interim agenda? All we can say is that the vanguard, isolated and fragmented, could do nothing. Some organisations have fared better than others (e.g. the IBRP) and lost less members in the 1980s. But nowhere has any proletarian organisation been able to assume even the skeletal outline of a responsible and effective organisation. The idea of being able, in present conditions, to create such an organisation is a chimera.

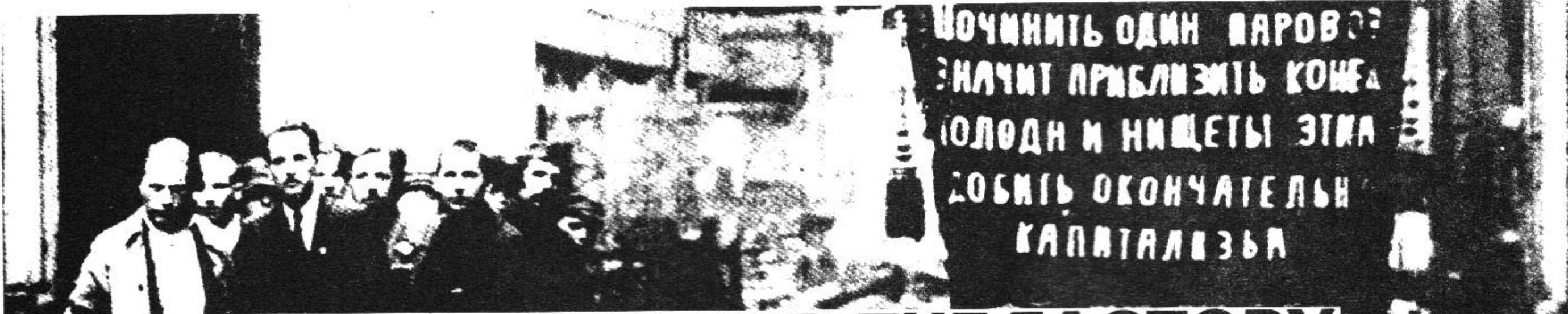
Thus the 1980s have seen the course of history moving away from the proletariat. But more importantly, they have called into question the schema that sees history as being composed of long sweeps of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary periods, more or less linked to the long-term ups and downs of the capitalist economy. The last twenty years cannot have been one of "revolution" - even an elephant is only pregnant for three years - unless we define all time before the revolution as "pre-revolutionary". What is clear is that the capitalist domination over the working class, which has existed, despite challenges



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# RUSSIA: REVOLUTION AND COUNTER-REVOLUTION



## 5. THE BOLSHEVIKS AND THE FACTORY COMMITTEES

For internationalists like ourselves defending the October Revolution from the slanders of the capitalists and their loyal opponents in the so-called labour movement is an expected task. However we must also, from time to time, take up the verbal cudgels against the seductive but superficial views of the sundry anarchists and so-called libertarian marxists who would divert the inexperienced and unwary from the real issues. Unable to challenge the legitimacy of the Bolsheviks as authentic representatives of the working class in the soviets, since they were the ONLY force which unambiguously stood for Soviet power, they divert their critique to the factory floor. Here, amid the nuts and bolts of the issue of workers control of industry they feel themselves to be on terra firma.

The origins of many anarchist fantasies about the role of the factory committees in the Russian Revolution are to be found in the writings of the anarchist Voline (see his "1917" published by Freedom Press in 1954) and G.P. Maximoff's "Syndicalists in the Russian Revolution". According to their scenario the Bolsheviks only supported the factory committees until they were swept to power by the workers. Power achieved they simply dissolved the committees.

A more subtle variant of this was put forward by M. Brinton in "The Bolsheviks and Workers Control" (Solidarity 1970). Brinton quite rightly points out that by the end of 1917 the factory committees were the most powerful institutions in Russia, more powerful even than the political body, the Soviets. And yet, undeniably this power declined rapidly and disappeared in the first few years, if not months, of the establishment of a Bolshevik government in October 1917. Whilst rejecting the Voline view that this was what the Bolsheviks had planned all along Brinton still argues that the factory committees were deliberately suppressed by the Bolsheviks because they were becoming too powerful.

Brinton's entire argument rests solely on one document, which, he claims, shows that the Central Council of the Petrograd Factory Committees was at odds with the Bolsheviks over workers control and self-management in the factories. According to him the document "Practical Manual for the implementation of Workers Control of Industry" is valuable because "it deals with how 'workers control' could rapidly be extended into 'workers' management'" and this was supposedly at odds with Lenin's view that all he wanted was workers control of a set of managers. We will deal with the issue of control versus management below but dispose of Brinton. This job was actually effectively done by Chris Goodey in "Factory Committees and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat (1918)" published in the crypto-Trotskyist journal CRITIQUE in Autumn 1974. He demonstrates that Brinton is something of a charlatan, quoting impeccably from Russian sources (which he could not read) and thus disguising the fact that his own knowledge of the above document was actually obtained at FIFTH hand and consisted only of a few lines quoted by D. Limon in a French article in AUTOGESTION 4 (1967). This perhaps explains why Brinton not only gets the wrong title, the wrong date and the wrong motive for the document but also obscures the fact that Lenin actually supported its proposals in December 1917

against other versions to run a socialist economy prepared by trades unions and economists.

We apologise for the apparent scholasticism of the argument here but Brinton's sloppy and unscientific methodology is too often used by the so-called libertarians in the proletarian political camp. Regarding themselves as operating with the only pure motives they repeat Brinton's arguments uncritically. In doing so they emphasise a gulf which did not exist within the Russian proletariat at the end of 1917.

### THE BOLSHEVIKS AND THE FACTORY COMMITTEES

Those who have followed this series will know that we have argued that the Bolsheviks cannot be separated from the most revolutionary elements of the class in the revolutionary period both before and after October 1917. This is especially true of the factory committees.

In a situation in which there was a total ban on trades unions in Tsarist Russia factory committees came into existence as a continuation of the old village system of having an elected headman or steward. "Sovety starost" or councils of elders were in fact legalised in 1903 in an attempt to prevent the workers from turning to more proletarian forms of organisation but since the law's purpose was all-too transparent the workers lost faith in them. At the beginning of the First World War the employers set up War Industry Committees to try to improve output for the war effort. The pro war Mensheviks (led by Gvozdev) and SRs sided with the employers in what was actually an anti-Tsarist alliance of labour and capital.

For precisely these reasons the Bolsheviks boycotted the committees until they saw the workers enthusiasm for them. Reluctantly they participated in elections to them. In 1916 the committees were disbanded as subversive and their leaders jailed by the Tsar.

Despite weak political leadership then, the workers of Petrograd had a historic experience of committees and councils. It was no accident that it was the women of the bread committees who organised the demonstrations and strikes which led to the fall of the Tsar. At the same time they obtained the release of the War Industry Committees leaders like Gvozdev. He, in turn, was mainly responsible for the recall of the Petrograd Soviet (see WORKERS VOICE 33).

Whilst the Soviet was thus formed "from the top down", in the factories "factory committees sprang up like mushrooms in the vertiginous days of the revolution" (S. Smith RED PETROGRAD p.57). Initially it was in the state-run factories where the Bolsheviks had least influence that factory committees were set up. This was because Menshevik and SR workers wanted to maintain production for a war effort which they now supported wholeheartedly. At the same time the most repressive managers were expelled from the factories and 2 at the Putilov arms works were killed (the shocked headlines of the bourgeois press conveniently forgetting the 257 murders of workers by managers in the years before 1917). At this point however the workers aim only for higher wages, the 8 hour day and social insurance.

On April 23rd the Menshevik and SR leaders of the Petrograd Soviet "who were as anxious as the SWFO (the employers organisation) to set up machinery for arbitration and for the avoidance of 'unofficial action by rank and file workers'" (Smith p.77) legalised the factory committees. Typically its main aim was to ensure continuous war production and it studiously avoided granting what the workers had already seized - the 8 hour day. Further "in the name of national defence, it called on striking workers to start work again, but did nothing when the employers locked them out" (M. Ferro THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION p.148). At this point the rate of investment was still going up since Menshevik and SR negotiations usually managed to restrain the workers from striking. However this was one of the main reasons why the workers in the factory committees turned more and more to the Bolsheviks. This was particularly true after the July Days when the class lines were drawn more acutely.

Against the obvious waverings of the Mensheviks the Bolshevik position was unambiguous. In August at the Second Factory Committee Conference Larin (who had himself recently joined the Bolsheviks from the Mensheviks) stated that

"the factory committees cannot only be seen as an institution safeguarding and guaranteeing the rights that workers have gained in the revolution. Workers' control in the factories is changing into a countervailing force that aims at managing the economy as a whole."  
(Quoted in Ferro p.168)

So much for the Brinton myth that the Bolsheviks saw the workers as only capable of control and not management of the factories. However the workers involved in the first efforts at self-management saw that it could not succeed if it only covered about 500 factories, if it was carried out in a situation of economic crisis and if they had no central co-ordination. As the Second Conference concluded "only an organisation representing the factory committees of all Russia can win a decisive victory".

Whatever the problems facing the factory committees, their activities convinced Lenin



that the working class was prepared for taking over power (even if some leading Bolsheviks weren't). Writing in hiding after the July Days he concluded that

"The development of capitalism, in turn, creates the PRE-CONDITIONS that enable really "all" to take part in the administration of the state..."

Given these economic pre-conditions, it is quite possible, after the overthrow of the capitalists and the bureaucrats, to proceed immediately, overnight, to replace them in the CONTROL over production and distribution, in the work of KEEPING ACCOUNT of labour and products, by the armed workers, by the whole of the armed population ...

...ALL citizens are transformed into hired employees of the state, which consists of the armed workers."  
(THE STATE AND REVOLUTION IN SELECTED WORKS (3 volumes) VOL II p.311)

Nowhere at this point does he mention anything about the state being run by a party. In fact he was well aware that the factory committees were not even a vanguard of the class. Trotsky pointed out that at this time "the factory committees lagged behind the masses at the same time that he was quoting Lenin to say that "the masses are a hundred times to the left of us" (THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION p.436). This faith in the working class did not evaporate once the Bolsheviks got into power.

#### THE FACTORIES AFTER OCTOBER

In fact after October Bolshevik declarations in favour of workers self-management came almost daily. On numerous occasions Lenin exhorted the working class that

"Creative activity at the grassroots is the basic factor of the new public life ... socialism cannot be decreed from above ... creative socialism is the product of the masses themselves."  
(COLLECTED WORKS Vol 26 p. 288)

Even the Party's role seemed confined to that of cheerleader

"...socialism cannot be implemented by a minority, by the Party. It can be implemented only by tens of millions who have learned to do it themselves."  
(COLLECTED WORKS Vol 27 p.135)

A government statement at this time (quoted in Ferro p.175 urged workers "Take the factories and guard them as the apple of your eye".

This emphasis on the masses running things for themselves lasted until the beginning of

the fight against foreign intervention and the White armies which began in earnest with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk signed in March 1918. The fact was that the Bolsheviks who had radically altered their programme in the course of the war and the revolution still had not evolved a new one that was fundamentally different from the reformist parties. At first they thought that they would be able to administer capitalism until the world revolution extended to other countries. However the class struggle between employers and workers reached a frenzied pitch as the workers realised for the first time that they had a government which would side with them. It is true that Lenin and Trotsky had the rather optimistic hope that foreign capital would bale out the Soviet state. To this end they tried to discourage seizures of factories. They soon learned however that the capitalists were only interested in sabotage.

Thus the workers pushed the Bolsheviks into the Nationalisation Decree of December 1917. It is sometimes argued that this was the first step towards state capitalism since it implied a centralised control of the whole economy and the subordination of the factory committees. This was not however the case. In the first place workers welcomed the decree as belatedly sanctioning what they were doing. Secondly the factory committees themselves had been calling for centralisation of their activities for months (even preceding the October Revolution). Given that the Soviets met regularly at this point the workers had complete confidence that nationalisation at this time was the same as socialisation for the whole working class. Factory committees still acted on their own to seize factories. As E.H. Carr points out the Council of National Economy (Vesenkha) which was set up to centralise economic planning was itself a product of the coming together of the factory committees.

"In some cases there was apparently even continuity of organisation; the Petrograd regional council of workers control - perhaps one of the few firmly established organs of workers control - transferred itself into the Petrograd Regional Council of National Economy"  
(Carr THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION Vol 2 p.80)

The Nationalisation Decree of December 1917 and the establishment of Vesenkha were then not the expression of the state capitalist ideas of the Bolsheviks but their very opposite. If we quote the Bolshevik programme which was published at this period we can see that there was a clear understanding of the distinction.

"... the epoch of proletarian dictatorship, there is only one way of (organising production), namely by proletarian nationalisation, by which we mean the transfer of all the means of production, distribution and exchange into the hands of the proletarian state, the greatest and most powerful working class organisation. We must carefully avoid confusing the nationalisation of production under the bourgeois regime, with the nationalisation of production under the proletarian regime ... the result of bourgeois nationalisation is to produce state capitalism."  
(THE ABC OF COMMUNISM by Bukharin and Preobrazhensky p.312)

#### THE DECLINE OF THE FACTORY COMMITTEES

However with the onset of the civil war the situation began to change. As the factory committees themselves clearly saw they could not operate in a situation of virtual economic collapse, with no capital and no raw materials. The proletarian seizure of power in one (or even many areas) cannot mean the end of capitalist relations immediately and this was soon shown to be the case in Russia. By April 1918 Lenin was beginning to express views directly contrary to those of the earlier period. Self-management was beginning to turn into a caricature of itself. Workers in many industries no longer saw themselves as the trustees of the factories for the

whole of the class but began to use the means of production to try to alleviate their own miseries. The most famous example of this came from the workers of the Alexandrovsky railway station in Petrograd who turned railway carriages into their private dwellings. Taking a hard look at the material condition which the workers faced in a Russia invaded by famine and 14 hostile armies Lenin concluded

"... there is no other alternative; either Soviet government triumphs in every advanced country in the world, or the most reactionary imperialism triumphs"  
(COLLECTED WORKS Vol.28 pp189-90)

We now see the gradual transformation of Lenin's thinking towards Taylorism or so-called scientific management, one-man management and the introduction of specialists. The fact that for Lenin the "proletariat has been thrashed within an inch of its life" meant that extraordinary measures were called for. The Russian working class was too small to manage production and fight a war against the imperialist powers at the same time. None of this was irrevocable but the fact that the original working class was decimated in the civil war meant that the process of development of state capitalism had begun. Even at the late stage of 1922 Lenin still hoped that this was a temporary retreat but NEP was just one more expression of the imminent defeat of the revolution. As to the factory committees their members who had initiated the project to build the new society in 1917 had by 1921 become the leading bureaucrats running the Soviet economy. It was thus not the demise of the factory committees which expressed the end of the revolution. It was rather the increasing failure of the working class to control their own organs which led to the rise of a "dictatorship of the proletariat" exercised as dictatorship of the party over the proletariat. However the full story of this process we will be telling in a future issue.

#### LESSONS OF THE FACTORY COMMITTEE EXPERIENCE

The experience of the Russian revolution shows that it is useless to make any attempts at polemical distinction between the Bolsheviks and the working class as a whole. No bourgeois party in history has ever been able to claim the loyalty of a single class so sweepingly as the Bolsheviks could in 1917-18. The problems that thus arose in the Russian revolution were the product, not of the programmatic failings of one party but rather an expression of the learning process of the working class. We can ignore those lessons at our peril.

To begin with Lenin was quite right to state

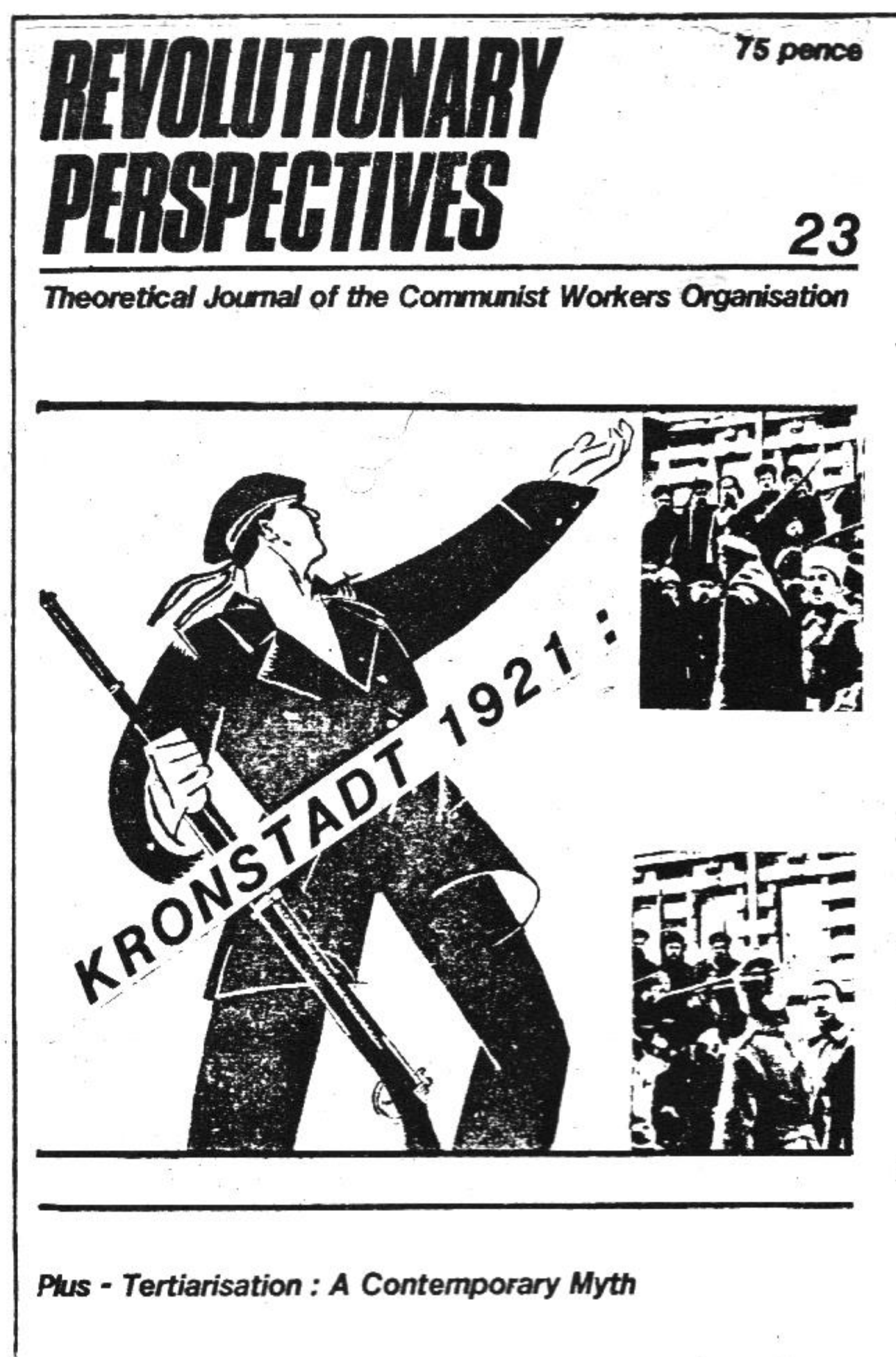
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## THE BOLSHEVIKS AND THE FACTORY COMMITTEES

that socialism could not be instituted by decree. It has to be the work of the masses themselves, active in their own organs. This is in fact what happened in 1917. The problems start to arise in 1918 when the combination of economic crisis and war begin to destroy the first experiment in workers control of an economy. This was not because collective management is beyond the working class (as the right wing bourgeois would have it) nor was it because the Bolsheviks had no faith in the working class (as the anarchists would say). Rather it was the product of horrendous material conditions.

This, of course leaves open the question of what it teaches us for the future struggles of the proletariat. The clearest lesson is that the self-activity of the class is the only guarantee of the continuing advance of the revolution. Where that process hits setbacks it may be possible for the proletariat to make retreats without the collapse of the revolution but those retreats can only be temporary otherwise the loss of momentum of class activity will permit the re-establishment of the old ruling class (even if in a new form). However it is equally useless (and undialectical) to sit down and try to think up purely formal guarantees which could prevent degeneration. Such cast-iron certainties are never provided by history.

One thing though is settled by the Russian Revolution and that is the preponderance of the political over the economic organs of the class. Despite the idiocies of the anarcho-syndicalist fringe, the Russian workers firmly recognised that the Soviet are the organs of power which set the goals of the economy. Individual factories are entrusted with their tasks and the workers in them manage the factories as a trust for the whole of the working class. The idea that each factory sets its own targets is a recipe for disaster. As long as the Soviets are created from the bottom upwards then there should be no conflict of interest between factory and soviets. This was the case after October but, as we have shown above, from February until then, the factories had been at constant loggerheads with the Soviet since the latter had been set up "from above" by the Mensheviks. It was the gradual rebuilding of the Soviets from below by the mass participation of the workers in their factory committees that explains the victory of the October Revolution.

When Lenin recognised that this mass participation in the revolution was declining he spared no effort to try to prevent it but there are strict limits to the power of exhortation. In the end he recognised his failure and thus he turned to the Bolshevik Party to take the place of the class. He hoped the Party would be able to administer capitalism until the arrival of the international revolution. It was this continued internationalism which marked out the proletarian character of Bolshevism despite all their errors and weaknesses. We will examine this in our next instalment on the 70th anniversary of the foundation of the Communist International.

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## STATE MURDER...

there was a sustained campaign in the press and TV to ensure that the "average citizen" would accept that this was all a good day's work to save honest folk. No television news bulletin on the issue failed to call the murder victims "terrorists", nor did each news item fail to paint a picture of horror about what might have happened had the IRA members not been murdered. As we have stated the fate of the IRA members does not concern us. Our task is to show

British ruling class. Laws to protect workers, laws to protect tenants, laws to prevent

the speculative profits of the likes of Mrs Thatcher's husband and son have all been abandoned but the State's political powers of repression have been increased. The capitalist reformists in the Labour Party may bleat about it but they do so less and less (The Guardian did its bit by calling the affair "muddle not murder"



IRA justice: woman tarred and feathered, again in Belfast



British justice: Baby hit by a plastic bullet in Belfast

the press campaign, particularly in the "popular" press, has created a climate in which state murder is OK. The hounding of witnesses in an attempt to find stories to discredit them, the mysterious reversal of the testimony of one young man all indicated how important for the British State this verdict was.

In short, what the Gibraltar verdict did was to increase the political power of the British State. Thatcher has stated that she has "rolled back" State control. What in fact she has done is use the State to more clearly define the interests of the

- a strange description for a very efficient execution!). After all the Labour Party in power passed many of the laws which have increased state repression. Internationalist Communists don't bleat about it but note the hypocrisy of these so-called democrats. Let them do their worst.

The more obvious their hypocrisy, the more weapons we have to expose the "democratic" state for what it is - an instrument of class repression.

○ ○ ○

Continued from p3

## MAY 68 A RE-EVALUATION

and slips, since the end of the last revolutionary wave, still exists. Against the view that sees the cycle as one of revolution/counter-revolution, we have to posit the view of the trajectory of capitalism as being one of general political domination over the working class, challenged by short periods of "pre-revolutionary" upheavals. The history of the last 20 years have shown that this is not one such period, and that the problems facing the class struggle and the revolutionary minorities stem from this fact. Thus May 68 was in effect a false dawn, and was no more historically significant than the struggle which preceded it, or followed it.

We do not think that we stand at the moment on the brink of a collapse of capitalism, or of an inter-imperialist war on a world scale. And if we did, our forces would be overwhelmed by events. Nor do we stand at the opening of a revolutionary period, though we possibly stand at the beginning of a new period of class struggle internationally. The alternatives facing capitalism are still - in a historical sense - war or revolution, but not in an immediate sense. What then are

the tasks facing communist organisations in this difficult period? While never turning our backs on the class struggle our priorities can only be the physical survival of our organisations and the addressing of the theoretical issues which have been raised by the last 20 years. Groups running headlong into activism, and grouplets organised round one issue (or person) will not survive the coming trials. "Even the flood waters finally abated/ Mind you, how few survived them" (Brecht).

In what circumstances the conditions for a re-emergence of the class struggle on a significant scale will mature we cannot say: there has been enough - too much! - crystal ball gazing in the revolutionary milieu. But capitalism can overcome its contradictions no more than a man can over leap his shadow. The future is as Kautsky in his pre-renegade days delineated it - Krisen, Kriege, Katastrophen: Crises, Wars, Catastrophes. The class struggle in society cannot be spirited away either - though there are times when it can be contained; at the moment we are living in such a time. Our potential role is limited by the times, and can be understood in one word: survival. The capacity to do this requires greater will and commitment than needed by those still hung-over on the illusions of the heady wine of May 68.

DGP



## CORRESPONDENCE

## THE PERIOD OF TRANSITION

Dear CWO

Our new publication "SUBVERSION" which you should have seen by now, is not intended to be a simple mouthpiece of our "group" but rather a vehicle for revolutionary discussion and debate and a means of bringing the work of different groups to a wider, or at least, a different readership. To this end we are positively soliciting material from other revolutionary groups and individuals on the major issues which face our class. Only one condition is that contributions should be written in an easily accessible form, avoiding jargon as far as possible and unexplained shorthand.

Whilst in writing I would like clarification of your views on the period of transition. We have always supported the need for the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' if this is understood as the international power of the workers councils. We are for ALL power to the workers councils and reject the ICC's notions of a separate state power structure. Whilst the MAIN function of the councils initially is to establish themselves as the sole class power internationally, to destroy all vestiges of the capitalist state, they must BEGIN at the earliest opportunity to carry out the social and economic transformation of society, to destroy wage labour, commodity production, money, the market etc. I think this is explained in the Wildcat pamphlet "Capitalism and its Revolutionary Destruction". I get the impression that the CWO sees this aspect of revolution as being postponed to a later date. Thus I have read references to housing provision in communism itself as being through the medium of state, cooperative and individual forms. And in the latest issue (WORKERS VOICE 41) to "our own forms of tax on the luxury wealth of the rich". This seems a long way from communism and dangerously close to some kind of "transitional society" envisaged by the Trotskyists (actually just a form of state capitalism).

Fraternally

MB (Subversion)

Dear M

Apologies for the delay in replying to your letter but it was only passed on to us just before WV42 was in preparation so we have been unable to reply before. We are sorry not to have been able to attend the ICC meeting in Manchester but the same tasks also prevented this.

On the political question you raise about the period of transition we thought we had already answered this verbally in the last meeting we held in Manchester. Our position remains that of our Platform and this was elaborated in REVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVES 13 (when we reprinted two texts we wrote in 1974). Here we wrote that "at no stage in the realisation of communism can the political tasks be separated from the economic ... it is historically inconceivable that we must wait for the dictatorship of the proletariat to establish itself globally before it begins to enact communist measures". We also say that once the seizure of power takes place we are talking about a fundamentally communist mode of production despite all the capitalist hangovers. This might explain why we can talk of "state, cooperative and individual forms of house ownership" in the LOWER stage of communism i.e. during the period of transition. As to the length of the period of transition we have never speculated but we do reject the anarchist and modernist theory that the world can do without a period of transition since a) the revolution won't break out simultaneously everywhere and b) the economic problems associated with dismantling imperialist relations in the periphery in particular will be enormous. The question of "our own forms of taxation" in the article on the poll tax is an attempt to

be ironic which should have been edited out since we meant nothing less than expropriation. Naturally we agree that the workers state in the period of transition is nothing less than the armed workers councils. I am sure you have not forgotten that it was the CWO's predecessors that first drew attention to the ICC's formalism over this issue. The texts referred to above were in fact drawn up as a contribution to this debate. Have you got them?

We have read "Capitalism and its Revolutionary Destruction" and it seems to us to veer close to the anarchist idea that their will be few problems in the transition period. However this is a model of clarity alongside "Subversion". Where is the POLITICAL explanation of the demise of "Wildcat" (which we now discover was the result of a shabby manoeuvre even if against a mischievous individual)? The reasons may be tortuous but if "Subversion" is to understand them and avoid its errors it should face up to them. And what does "Subversion" stand for? The only thing you tell us is you are against "idiotic jargon and sectarian slag-offs" but as we assume everyone else is then what is so special about that? What in fact "Subversion" appears to stand for is not taking a position on anything. What you have are a few reflex positions "class solidarity is good", "Lenin is bad" (the latter based on an incredible ignorance of his positions - in the article on Sylvia Pankhurst you might have mentioned that it was Lenin who announced that NEP was a retreat to state capitalism. The difference between him and Pankhurst was that she thought retreat unnecessary whilst he hoped it would only be temporary but then to give a fair hearing to all communist positions, however mistaken, has never been a hallmark of councilism).

It appears that you see ALL serious political debate (which to be deep has to be in printed form to give communists the chance to think about each others ideas) is just sectarian and that we should "just get on with it" and give out leaflets together. But that is not how a revolutionary organisation is going to be built (and we would have thought that the Wildcat experience would have taught this). Engels wrote once that "the biggest sectarians and the biggest brawlers at times shout loudest for unity. Nobody in our lifetime has given us more trouble and been more treacherous than the shouters for unity" (Letter to Bebel in MESW p.675). Unity can only come about after a period of clarification (which takes place through theory and practice) but who today can achieve anything in discussion with a collective like "Subversion" which doesn't even know (apparently) why it exists.

What is worse is the fact that Wildcat previously and Subversion today seem to avoid any direct discussion of the central issues such as communist organisation or perspectives. And yet you use some of the positions of the communist left watered down here and there with bits of anarchism and councilism. We would have thought that the Wildcat experience would have taught that revolutionaries cannot act cohesively unless they have a solid understanding of why they are working together.

If all this sounds like a lecture it is a product of a number of years of trying to get to political grips with the ideas that animate groups like "Subversion". At the moment we think it a step backwards from "Wildcat" and we are not optimistic about it making any contribution to what the working class so urgently needs - a clear political reference point.

Communist greetings

CWO

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ULSTER  
A WORKING CLASS  
PERSPECTIVE

for tactical support of any national struggle have simply disappeared. To put it bluntly the tasks of the working class today are to organise for the communist revolution and to unify across national boundaries, building such unity from scratch if need be. Even where they are not subsumed in the conflict between Russian and Western imperialism, nationalist movements which emerge today cannot achieve national liberation, and they serve merely as ideological and physical attacks on the working class. The "Republican hero" James Connolly (while still a socialist) realised the class nature of nationalism when he described it as;

"A movement which would lay aside class contention to gain national ends, so enabling the bourgeoisie to prevent working class expression."

## COMMUNIST PERSPECTIVE

The CWO cannot wish away all the nationalist and sectarian ideologies which grip the working class in Ulster. What we can do is criticise them ruthlessly and work towards the forging of unity in struggle. Consequently;

- We support all struggles of whatever section of the class to defend itself against the economic crisis, and call for their unification and extension across sectarian, localist and craft divisions.

- We support all attempts by the workers to organise for self-defence against the army and para-militaries of all shades, and for their expulsion from working class areas.

- We are absolutely hostile to any element which, however critically, gives support to the IRA or Sinn Fein, since they are carrying out the policy of capitalism - divide and conquer.

Today only the proletarian revolution can destroy imperialism, and therefore the fight for this is the only anti-imperialist fight.

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# WORKERS VOICE

## ULSTER

## 20 YEARS OF 'THE TROUBLES'

### A WORKING CLASS PERSPECTIVE

In October Northern Ireland entered its third decade of "troubles". Since the first RUC attack on an undefended Civil Rights march in 1968 there have been approximately 2600 deaths due to violence, 55% of the victims being described as non-combatants, the overwhelming proportion of whom were working class. This along with tens of thousands of serious injuries means that there are few working class families who have not been on the receiving end in one way or another.

What's more after years of relative stability the pace of blood-letting seems set to accelerate once again. The military wing of the Provos is in the ascendant following a series of successful operations in Ulster, Britain and the continent. The IRA is reputedly armed to the teeth with sophisticated new weapons and explosives, but has spared a few old fashioned bullets for workers its kangaroo courts have deemed "collaborators" or "criminals". The British state has recently supplemented its day-to-day repression with a more or less open return to shoot-to-kill policing. To complete the deadly trio loyalist murder gangs have stepped up their activities again and, as usual, have been responsible for some of the most savage sectarian atrocities, including attacks on catholic pubs and betting shops in the last six months.

With this perspective it has never been more urgent for socialists, and the working class in general, to respond to the physical and ideological attacks of all these capitalist gangsters and con-men. But let us first debunk the myth that the IRA has anything to do with socialism or the fight against imperialism, a myth propagated not only by them but by their Stalinist and Trotskyite supporters throughout Ireland and Britain.

#### IN THE BEGINNING....

The crisis and collapse of the old sectarian Orange state, which is often attributed to the Civil Rights agitation, in fact had its origins much earlier, and really was the result of quite profound changes in the nature of capitalism in Northern Ireland. The most salient point is that in the 25 years 1950-75 employment in shipbuilding fell by 60%,



British soldiers on the streets of Belfast

textiles by 70%, and agriculture by 45%. Manufacturing employment as a whole fell by only 15%, being bolstered by new multi-national investment. This was nothing but the castration of the locally based bourgeoisie, and was mirrored politically by the rise of the 'liberal' strand of Unionism most closely associated with Prime Minister O'Neill. In attempting to identify with an ideology of economic modernisation and planning O'Neill was forced into confrontation with archaic local government, which in turn was bound up with the daily sectarian practices in housing, employment and policing.

Into the Unionist split came the petty-bourgeois Civil Rights movement, who demanded an immediate end to sectarian practices in the state. It was the reaction to this movement of the Unionist neanderthal right which largely precipitated the "troubles". The officially sanctioned baton charges and pogroms in the Catholic ghettos, ending with the deployment of British troops in August 1969, ensured that the initiative was passed on from petty-bourgeois liberals to petty bourgeois Republicans, who claimed they could protect the Catholic population.

Of course the element which really frightened the Stormont regime was the mass participation of workers. If the demands of the Civil Rights and subsequent movements were in themselves bourgeois objectives, the fight against sectarian repression was an integral part of the class struggle for Catholic workers. But just as we have always maintained, if a working class movement fails to assert its political independence it will inevitably be led onto ground acceptable to capitalism. Hence, the anger of the Catholic workers, which reflected their real material conditions as an oppressed group divided from their class brothers, became grist to the mill of reformist and Republicans.

Increasingly in the last 20 years the conflict has resolved itself as one between the British state and the IRA, with either sides strategies remaining fairly constant despite various guises.

For the British government, Western imperialism guard-dog in the province, the catchword has always been stability. Their central policy has always been to pacify the Catholic working class in particular by trying to persuade them that sectarian Unionist practice was being reformed and restructured away by London. This, needless to say, is not to improve the workers quality of life but an attempt to isolate the IRA and cheapen at least the security burden of the unwanted province. As the "emergency" alone costs the UK about £13m per week Ulster is no mere side show.

For their part the IRA long ago gave up the notion that they could win a military victory against the British army. Instead their policy is to conduct a terror campaign of greater or lesser intensity while seeking political legitimacy and influence through Sinn Fein, who have entered the capitalist electoral circus. The "realpolitik" of trying to draw on the support of the young working class means that Sinn Fein have tacked on a few "socialist credentials" to their reactionary nationalist politics. But as we have argued elsewhere (see "Sinn Fein: Socialist or Capitalist in WV26 - available from the group address) where these policies are anything more than straight forward reformism, they are stale state-capitalist remedies already discredited.

#### IMPERIALISM

The biggest leftist myth which the Republicans have adopted is that of the so-called "national liberation struggle". In the ranks of their intellectuals there is now much talk of "fighting British imperialism" and "international solidarity". Some of them even laughing claim their analysis to be "Marxist".

For the benefit of Republican activists, imperialism is not just about redcoats on the streets and the fact that we don't speak Irish anymore; it is an economic and political relationship between an advanced capitalist state and a backward one. In fact the "six counties" have always been a part of British capitalism, Britain's relationship with them being no more imperialist than that with Lancashire or Wales.

In Marxist terms to speak of British imperialism at all anymore is to devalue the concept. The development of the imperialist system since 1945 has meant that for a long time Britain itself, and indeed Eire, has been under the domination of US capital, which exercises hegemony over the Western economic and military bloc as a whole. It is crass and utopian to believe that a united Irish capitalism, no matter how radical, could act independently of either the US bloc, or its weaker rival Russia. The British will stay as long as the bloc as a whole deems it necessary to have a policeman ensuring stability.

For socialists there are no "absolute rights" to self-determination. All issues have to be judged by asking, "In what way does this or that struggle advance, either directly or indirectly, the position of the working class?"

Today the material basis for communism exists, while imperialism dominates the globe. Capitalism is in historical decline and the reasons

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## C.W.O.

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