

About Workers' Councils

IF ANYONE asks what workers' councils are, there is only one possible answer: they are the natural forms of organization which, at a certain stage of social development, the workers use in their struggle against existing social relations. This word "natural" must then be understood to mean that their formation is as natural as the appearance of a certain kind of fruit on a certain tree, which, as the saying goes, is known by its fruits. But it should be noted that this applies to a certain stage of development, the one in which we have been living for about half a century.

For example, a hundred years ago, in the countries in which modern capitalism had already developed, the trade unions were the natural organizations of the workers, because these workers were fighting a different battle then than today; because the conflicts in which they were involved then can be described more as conflicts with a certain patron or with a few entrepreneurs than as conflicts with the entrepreneurial milieu and the bourgeois state. Back then it was a question of improving their position within the framework of bourgeois society; today they clash with bourgeois society as such, even when the form of the conflict is limited in scope.

In just over half a century, both the position of the unions and that of the workers changed fundamentally. As that happened, as the trade union movement became more and more integrated into existing society (fused with it), the unions ceased to be the natural organizations of workers caught in a conflict situation.

"The trade union movement," Mertens recently declared, "can only fight the existing society with the weapons of that society itself." That is a true word. But it is equally true that workers can only fight with their own weapons. That is why organs that exhibit all the essential characteristics of workers' councils appear with ever-increasing frequency, both in the simplest so-called "wildcat" strike and in more extensive and serious social clashes.

What is in a Name?

That in most cases the bodies referred to here are not called “workers' councils” does not alter the essence of the matter. Shakespeare already knew that a rose would smell exactly as it does today if it happened to bear a different name. It is not what the workers' struggle organizations are called by themselves or by others that is important, but what they are and are not in practice.

What they are not is particularly clear. They are not attempts to achieve certain political or social ideals. Nor are they attempts to breathe artificial life into carefully conceived theoretical constructions. No theorist in the entire labor movement has ever spoken of workers' councils before they were formed in practice. They have nothing to do with ideals. Even if they wanted to occupy themselves with them, which is highly unlikely, they would not have the time. They arise everywhere and without exception in order to fulfil extremely practical tasks, tasks for which they are continually placed by the struggle itself.

Any artificiality is foreign to them. The mere fact that they are spontaneously formed time and again wherever the workers join the struggle in Germany in 1918, in 1919 and in 1920 (during the Ruhr Uprising), in East Germany in June 1953, in Hungary in 1956, the fact, moreover, that practically all the struggle committees of “wild” strikes on a smaller scale show exactly the same structure as the famous examples that have made history, proves how much the word “natural”, used at the beginning of this essay, applies to them.

What the workers' councils really are can only be known by studying very carefully and comparing these phenomena which appear again and again in the practice of the class struggle. It is clear that what they have in common, what appears to be peculiar, if not to all councils, at least to the great majority of them, is the essential thing that characterizes them.

With a Smile.

The first “workers' council” originated in Russia. That is where the name first appeared during the 1905 revolution. In St. Petersburg an organization was formed, which called itself so. But it does not fit the pattern; it is nothing like the combat organizations of later times. The latter always arise in the companies; they are composed of company workers; someone's election to a workers' council or a strike committee is in no way based on his political opinions. Political

opinions are not an advantage in a workers' council or a strike committee. Political differences of opinion go hand in hand with this, and the task facing a workers' council or strike committee requires the strength of united company workers.

The Petersburg "workers' council" was composed of representatives of political organizations and labor unions. At the time, everyone took this very seriously. Today no one would be able to suppress a smile if Mertens, Kloos and Van Eibergen together with Han Lammers ("New Left"), Van der Spek (PSP) and similar progressive poultry were to sit in one umbrella body calling itself "workers' council."

The workers' councils formed in Russia in 1917 are something totally different. They are spontaneously formed bodies through which the oppressed masses seek to assert their will. Soon it becomes clear how badly these councils fit in with the organizational views of the Bolshevik party. Very soon they were shunted to a dead end. Under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, the country is heading for state capitalism and dictatorship. There is no place for workers' councils, officially or unofficially, any more than there is in bourgeois democracy.

However, what the Russian masses realized for one brief moment in the revolutionary fermentation process has since then been inseparable from spontaneous proletarian action. Since 1917 and 1918 the workers' councils or what can be equated with them have been incessantly emerging as organizations of limited life to perform very concrete tasks that the traditional organizations do not want to take on, cannot take on because of their (integrated) position in society.

In Yugoslavia.

Outside the general pattern, like the "workers' council" of St. Petersburg, are also the so-called "workers' councils" in Yugoslavia. It is true that they are not political bodies like these, and it is true that what they have in common with all other workers' councils is that they function in the enterprises. However, they lack something that is extremely essential in real workers' councils, even if they only have the primitive form of strike committees. Yugoslav "workers' councils" are signatory bodies; they are not formed, like the others, to take decisions, to impose a will, to exercise control. This characterizes all the bodies that are

considered workers' councils here, even though they are often not even aware of the exercise of this control.

Besides, this control of the councils is a limited one. What further characterizes them, apart from their origin in the companies, is that they are composed of trusted representatives, who can be immediately relieved of their mandate by the workers who elected them, if they are not satisfied with their policy.

One might call that a new kind of democracy. At any rate, it is a different kind of democracy than one finds in the trade union movement, where — as evidenced among other things by the statistics given by TV Allen in his book “Power in Trade Unions” — the administrators rule for generations.