

Bolshevism as an alternative to self-imposed impotence?: A few thoughts on “What is to be done in times of weakness?”

Fredo Corvo

2 November 2021

In the revolutionary years after the First World War, the Dutch council communists followed with interest the social, economic and political developments in what was then the most unstable country in Europe, Germany. The council movements in both countries were closely linked through discussions and joint organisational work. Now Germany is the most stable country in Europe, even if it does not remain untouched by everything. This apparent stability in Germany also applies to the Netherlands. Relative stability is obviously not conducive to the existence of revolutionary minority organisations.

In both the Netherlands and Germany, council communism is now only a source of inspiration. It has long ceased to be a living movement able to play a role in the workers' struggle on the basis of current analyses. But while in the Dutch-speaking world only a few communist-inspired people are still active, and that only on the internet, in Germany there are several websites of more or less organised groups with activities "In Real Life". But apart from occasional actions, there is no effective participation in the workers' struggle in Germany either. A recent discussion article (1) on the German blog Communaut blames council communism, in addition to Endnotes' "communisation" theory (2), for the sorry state of German circles that call themselves *social revolutionary or anti-authoritarian communist*. The present plight is said to be mainly due to the following principles of council communism:

- trust in the spontaneity of the working masses;
- the need for the revolutionary minority to hibernate in theoretical circles in times of social peace;
- the crisis of capitalism as the trigger for a communist mass movement;
- the rejection of workers' parties and trade unions as counterrevolutionary institutions.

In contrast, the article proposes building an "oppositional social base" within the "existing" and building a political organisation with a programme.

In general, I can agree with this critique and the alternative formulated very vaguely above. But the elaboration of the article's proposed solution, working in the trade unions, in "workers' parties" and the creation of a mass party, seems to me a throwback to Bolshevism (3). On the other hand, I will point out here some other basic principles of council communism - including, incidentally, those of Marx and Engels - and the possibilities of organising a revolutionary minority that can contribute to the independent workers' struggle.

What was called *council communism* in the 1930s to distinguish it from party communism, was in fact an extremely diverse movement, in any case broader in scope than the tendency of its namesake Otto Rühle. The critique of the party and the trade union movement was not limited to aspects of organisational structure, but was essentially based on the experience of the social democratic mass organisations' choice of patriotism in the First World War and on an understanding (whether correct or incorrect) of a change in the historical period of capitalism (*imperialism, death crisis*). This gave rise to three basic principles in relation to the party:

1. Communist consciousness develops en masse in the working class only in revolution, which is conceived as a long process.

2. The revolutionary party can only exist as a (significant) minority of conscious revolutionaries.
3. This party cannot put itself in the place of these masses, neither in the struggle before and during the seizure of power, nor after the conquest of power by the working masses.

So here I represent a party position as it was held, among others, by the Berlin and Essen direction of the KAPD and in large parts of the Unionen movement, by the Gruppe Internationale Kommunisten (Holland), by the Red Fighters, by the Communistenbond 'Spartacus' in the Netherlands during and after the Second World War (4). It was also more or less clear to this pro-party current within council communism that a revolutionary party (or International) could not be founded at will, but only under pre-revolutionary circumstances, such as existed in Germany in 1918 under the influence of the imperialist war, or predicted in the Netherlands after the Second World War, or during a prolonged recession, as in Germany in the 1920s, or during the world depression after the 1929 crash, each of which was expected to produce a revolutionary revival. That these expectations were unjustified in retrospect does not alter the correctness of the historical conditions for the formation of a revolutionary party or international. A peacefully developing and prospering capitalism cannot be an avenue for revolution.

From the moment that almost all the currents that emerged from the KAPD call themselves "council communist", we see, for example, alongside Rühle's coherent but one-sided and false rejection of the concept of the party, a Pannekoek who is sometimes for and sometimes against "the party". However, a better understanding of the contingency behind this volatile attitude emerges when we realise that Pannekoek wrote these texts as a statement in discussions within the council movement. In the 1930s, 1950s and 1960s, Pannekoek (rightly) did not see a pre-revolutionary situation, while at the end and shortly after the Second World War he certainly saw opportunities for a revolutionary revival and thus also for the "new party". The constant with Pannekoek - and even more clearly with the GIK(Holland) - is that the revolutionary minorities in all circumstances fulfil a propagandist function in the struggle against bourgeois ideology. They participate in open workers' struggles without putting themselves in the place of the workers, and in revolutionary revivals also as the party or parties of the most conscious minority or minorities. The GIK (Holland) continued to participate in the workers' struggle in the 1930s, even though it had declined, even while recognising that counterrevolution had won and the road to a Second World War was open. It rejected purely "theoretical" activity, even as it concentrated on drawing lessons from the class struggle in Russia, Germany and Spain.

Excursus

The views of the Bolsheviks were and are in contrast to those of the council communists. Lenin and Trotsky, as Bolsheviks, assumed that communist consciousness does not arise in the working class but among the "intellectuals". The latter had to guide the unconscious class through the party, using appealing but sometimes downright misleading slogans like "all power to the councils". Once in power, the councils were disempowered by the unions and subordinated to a state capitalist conception on the reformist model. In order to consolidate "soviet power" (read: the governing power of the Bolshevik Party), the Bolsheviks demanded that the Comintern-affiliated communist parties outside Russia should influence their governments as mass parties to promote the interests of the Bolshevik state. Wherever possible, they should form "workers governments" and fronts with the bourgeois left, adopting nationalist tones where necessary. Trotsky's "Fourth" International was founded at a time of decline in the revolutionary workers' movements after the First World War and combined all the above "tactics" into a "transitional programme" that would eventually bring him back to the head of the Russian state.(5) The fact that this "transitional programme" is rejected today by various tendencies within Trotskyism and also by the article in *Communaut* (6) does not prevent them from using the same tactics.

What is to be done in times of weakness? rightly states :

"A revolutionary mass party cannot simply be conjured up voluntaristically from a hat overnight. Our contribution is therefore not an immediate practical proposal, but aims to justify the need for such a party and to establish it as a strategic horizon of our current practice."

It is noteworthy that the article proposes a *mass party* and does *not at all* advocate a party of the most conscious workers, i.e. a *minority* of the working class. It identifies this widespread notion of council communism with the

"conception of the early council communists, who advocated not the building of a mass party but the formation of workers' councils as an alternative to these parties. According to them, there was no need for a revolutionary party, but for a revolutionary class that had to create the corresponding organs of class power beyond the party - precisely the councils".

Here, the article cites Rühle's anti-party view, which I oppose to the party tendency in the council movement, which advocated a *minority* party like the KAPD. A party in the sense of the organised minority of the most conscious and militant workers, which, even if it is a significant minority, as part of the working class - not only through its social composition and presence in the workplaces (on which the Angry Workers group blindly places itself), but also and above all through its revolutionary programme - can have a real influence on the proletarian struggle and decision-making in the councils. However, this is without replacing the power of the councils with the power of the parties (e.g. by imposing a voting system on their members in the councils), with the power of the trade union movement, or with private or state capitalist management.

The possible danger of a revolutionary party becoming bureaucratic and its leaders ruling over its members is something that the proponents of the mass party want to counter with "democratic mechanisms". This leaves open the question of how the less conscious or even unconscious masses who are members of this party will use them. It will be precisely the politically distinct factions of the party that use intra-party democracy to manipulate the members as voting cattle for their own purposes. Against this kind of organisational action, the Communist Bond 'Spartacus' declared:

"The self-activity of the members, this general education, this conscious participation in the workers' struggle, makes any creation of a party bureaucracy impossible. On the other hand, no adequate measures can be found by organisational means if the members lack this self-activity and this education". (Tasks and Characteristics of the New Party, 1945)

The same ineffectiveness applies to the democratisation of the state, of which *What is to be done...* wants to demand:

"political demands for democratisation and communalisation (...), the implementation of which would allow the wage-earning majority to actually exercise political power and prevent counter-revolutionary aspirations."

What do we see here but a more modern formulation of Trotsky's transitional programme? Nor do these "democrats" explicitly exclude participation in elections, of course in the form of the "revolutionary parliamentarism" defended by the Comintern:

"Such a party would not be an electoral club loyal to the state, but would have to act in fundamental opposition to the ruling parties and would use the parliamentary circus - if at all - as a stage for making audible the fundamental criticism of the bourgeois constitution of society and linking it with the struggle for concrete reforms."

The proposed mass party is also to become the ruling party of government, and the article does not even bother to hide this Leninist organ of power behind the fig leaf of a "council democracy". In fact,

the party and its predecessors are presented in all sorts of formulations and increasingly as the instrument of power of the working class:

With their programme, the communists are "rallying points for resistance to capital".

The communists strive for "hegemony" [Duden "dominance, leading role, superiority, supremacy"]:

"If they [the communists] want to achieve hegemony, they must, as an organised force, win the majority of wage-earners to a communist programme."

The councils are significant to the article as instruments in the hands of the party:

"Should a revolutionary movement be formed with councils or similar organs of class power, what matters is which political programme - and this ultimately means: which party - will prevail in the workers movement and thus in the councils and ultimately in society as a whole, and thus can hope for the active support of the masses."

Yes, even if the masses (not even the working masses) come to an unspecified "socialist consciousness", as the article says, it is the party and not the class itself that represents the interests of the working class and builds power:

"If spontaneous discontent over individual grievances or even a diffuse unease with present society is to develop into a socialist consciousness of the need for its overthrow, independent class organisations are needed to promote these educational processes on a broad front, **to represent the interests of the class** and to build up a **counter-power** to the ruling reactionary forces" [F.C.'s emphasis]

The article does not touch, or hardly touches, on the primary question of class consciousness. I do so here because the concept of the origin of class consciousness is crucial for a party that wants to promote the independence of the working class. Already in their first writings, Marx and Engels pointed out that communism develops out of the working class and that class consciousness develops massively only in revolution:

(...) a class [the proletariat] (...) from which emanates the consciousness of the necessity of a thorough revolution, the communist consciousness, which can naturally also develop among the other classes by virtue of the conception of the position of this class.

(...) both for the mass production of this communist consciousness and for the implementation of the cause itself, a mass change of people is necessary, which can only take place in a practical movement, in a revolution. (Marx/Engels, *The German Ideology*, I Feuerbach).

For a council communist view that is in line with this, I take inspiration from an extract from a reaction by Paul Mattick to the well-known text *Towards a New Workers' Movement*, which the GIK (Holland) submitted to the international council movement for discussion. It also provides an opportunity to explain the "crisis of capitalism" that weighs on contemporary social revolutionaries. Mattick accuses the GIK (Holland) of:

an "unsurmounted social-democratic conception of the development of human consciousness. If social democracy hoped for socialism through the development of social democratic ideology, the Dutch also consider communist revolution and communism to be possible only when the workers have, to a decisive degree, more or less clearly "grasped" their tasks and possibilities. Here, too, consciousness conceived as ideology makes history. First man thinks, then he understands and then he acts. But this conception contradicts actual historical events, and the nonsensical nature of it is shown again every day in the fact that the masses do not comprehend and yet in the last instance act correctly. The revolution is not made conscious in the sense of consciousness as it is generally

understood today. The many errors with regard to the question: "history and class consciousness" result from the transfer of the laws of the formation of consciousness of the individual to the class problem. (We shall soon deal with this question most thoroughly). Class consciousness, however, is something different and is subject to different laws than the consciousness of the individual. By neglecting this difference, one has already robbed oneself of the possibility of coming closer to the solution of the problem. The mass of workers - no matter how far their class consciousness (as ideology) is developed - come into situations that force them to act. If they act first, the new situation that arises brings forth its own consequences. The workers are forced, whether they like it or not, to take ever more radical steps, and each of these steps forces the further pursuit of a goal that is conceptually unrecognised or only slightly recognised. The struggle for mere existence compels the workers to revolutionary actions, these actions compel dictatorship, dictatorship compels the extension of communism. Every single stage forces the next stage out of itself, or the first stage already ends in defeat, which causes the death of those fighting. If the capitalist economy is ideologically determined by commodity fetishism and if production and distribution are regulated by a social relation, a progressive development of capitalism was nevertheless and precisely because of this possible. The same social relation in which the revolution has to take place excludes a conscious action of the working class, without therefore excluding the revolution. If capitalism develops and lives "blindly", the revolution against capitalism can also only take place "blindly". Another view breaks through historical materialism. And more, it turns against all historical facts. To count on a moment when the masses already know exactly what they have to do before the actions is nonsense. **Their compulsive action only creates the possibility of conceptually grasping the new situation with success. The compulsion to action must be stronger than capitalist ideological influence in order to render the latter ineffective.**" Source: Mattick, *Differences in the Councils Movement* (7) [F.C.'s emphasis]

Mattick here accuses the GIK (Holland) of a purely propagandist function of the revolutionary minorities, following the example of the activity of Pannekoek and Gorter in the social democratic movement before 1914. We must also take up this accusation now, not in spite of but precisely because of the perfectly correct statement in *Communaut*:

The revolutionary mass movements of the early 20th century would not have been possible at all without the organisational groundwork of the social democratic parties. (Thesis 1.)

Whether Mattick's reproach to the GIK (Holland) was justified or not is now irrelevant. What is important is that he states that *class consciousness* and *class struggle* coincide, and that he distinguishes this conscious being from ideology. By *ideology*, Mattick means what is also called world outlook. The propagandist task of communists lies at the level of world outlook, in the struggle against the constant stream of ideology representing bourgeois class interests. Propaganda should create space for the recognition of the interests of the working class vis-à-vis all other classes. This coincides with a remark by Trotsky in his *History of the Russian Revolution* that the puzzling "spontaneity" of the February revolution of 1917 was the result of ... the anti-war propaganda of the Bolshevik party.

This propagandist task - quite different from the retreat into "theory" - also confronts every self-confident organisation of revolutionaries today, in the "time of weakness". Spontaneity does not arise of its own accord from the crises of capitalism. Only when workers recognise their own interests as a class vis-à-vis other classes in the constantly changing and shifting phenomena of crisis can spontaneous struggle arise. This presupposes that the conscious minorities, the present circles and groups, know what are the most urgent problems facing the proletarians around them - both employed and unemployed, intellectual workers and manual workers alike, regardless of education, type of employment contract or social benefits. The causes of each of these problems, as well as possible solutions, are the subject of all kinds of circulating opinions, picked up by traditional and

"social" media, filtered for "popularity" and selected by bourgeois political and trade union organisations according to bourgeois ideologies and the bourgeois interests behind them. Good communist propaganda makes these class interests visible and develops broadly or, where possible, more concretely, possibilities of struggle, links short-term perspectives to the long-term struggle for workers' power and communism.

The function of today's groups is not "merely theoretical" or even "merely propagandist". Sporadically, there are open labour struggles. Just as the GIK (Holland) continued to take part in occasional workers' struggles in the 1930s when these had declined overall, today's groups can play an active role with their concrete perspective, without putting themselves in the place of the workers. In addition to propagandist tasks - to continue using social-democratic and Bolshevik jargon - the groups also have *agitational* tasks. These include proposing slogans and demands that express what tends to broaden, generalise and deepen the struggle in the action of the working masses, depending on the concrete circumstances. In short, proposing slogans and demands that appeal to broader sections of the class, sending mass delegations to other sectors of the class, taking control of their own struggles through mass discussions and re-electing representatives for tasks that cannot be carried out on a mass basis.

With the exception of the KAPD Essen tendency, to which Herman Gorter belonged, struggles and demands within capitalism, whether economic or political, were not rejected by the historical council movement. Thus, the unemployed councils demanded higher state benefits and identified the generous allocations by the social democratic government to the counterrevolutionary Reichswehr and the Freikorps to finance these benefits. (8)

All this has nothing to do with a minimum programme of reforms in capitalism as proposed in *Communaut*. In the tradition of the bourgeois left, the state is presented as a tool of the workers' struggle in the passage quoted above: "In addition to demands that mitigate economic competition within the working class, this minimum programme must above all contain political demands for democratisation and communalisation, the implementation of which would allow the wage-earning majority to actually exercise political power and prevent counterrevolutionary aspirations." In reality, these left policies mainly bring jobs in parliaments, in the party or trade union bureaucracy, or in the media. But within the working class, democratic and reformist illusions are reinforced.

No immediate results can be expected from propaganda and agitation. As Mattick pointed out, revolutionary development depends largely on the impulses that the capitalist crisis (and, I would add, the imperialist war) can give to a "spontaneous" development of workers' struggles and *proletarian* consciousness. The mass of workers will not be revolutionary in a crisis-free capitalism. Only when workers as a class exercise total power over society can *communist* consciousness develop on a large scale. Workers' struggle is at best a long process of increasing and then disappearing organisation in open struggles, and a consequent growth of consciousness in the class that emerges in the next struggle. The revolutionaries as a minority contribute to this with propaganda and agitation. This requires that instead of having false expectations about specific sectors of the class (e.g. the operaist "mass worker" or worse the cross-class grouping of refugees or "yellow vests") or specific "forms of struggle" ("sabotage", "refusal to work"), the groups apply a long-term view to the development of capitalism and class struggle, to the emergence of historical openings for proletarian revolutionary development. Without cooperation and discussion between the current local groups, this long-term vision, this communist programme, cannot emerge.

The periodic crises of capitalism, especially when they are global and protracted, can indeed trigger a revolutionary struggle in which one step forces the next and beyond, of which the working masses usually learn only afterwards. This process is uneven, with smaller and larger minorities within the class developing different views on the course and progress of the struggle. But this process is not

mechanical and the capitalist crisis is not a guarantee. Against the various theories (the "Kladderadatsch" of the centre in the SPD, the insoluble sales problem in Rosa Luxemburg, a "death crisis of capitalism" in the KAPD, and the fall of the rate of profit in Grossmann/Mattick) Pannekoek argued that capitalism will always find a way out unless the proletarian revolution puts an end to it. (9) A wait-and-see attitude - as propagated by the SPD central office - which refuses propaganda and agitation tasks until the collapse of the German economy, means not recognising that what views are present in the group are the product of the proletarian struggle and must again be part of it in order to drive the process forward. Not to fulfil this function means abandoning ever larger sections of the working class in Germany for whom conditions already are a crisis. Ultimately, it also means the end of a group that is not up to the task.

But what about the existing trade unions and left parties? "What is to be done..." refers to these bourgeois organisations as "workers' organisations" and accuses the council communists of not being active in these organisations. Historically, this is not correct. As, for example, Paul Mattick, the "Red Fighters", and Willy Huhn, each different, people inspired by council communism were active mainly in education and training programmes of left parties, youth organisations and trade unions. When strike rallies and other actions are organised by bourgeois organisations, this is not in itself a reason for communists to stay away. However, this is different from the Bolshevik infiltration and takeover policy that Trotskyism has elevated to an art form. Council communists have also actively participated in radical and non-state trade unions, like Mattick in the IWW in the United States, or even helped found them, like the Unionen of the 1920s in Germany and the Eenheidsvakbond, later Eenheidsvakcentrale 1945 in the Netherlands. The council movement has always recognised the value of a permanent organisation of revolutionary-minded workers broader than the party. However, it always posed the question of the relationship between these unions, united in the AAUD, and the party (KAPD), which was answered in different ways. Pannekoek expressed doubts about the foundation of the AAUD from the beginning. He described as an important turning point the moment when a significant minority of the class separated itself from the organisations that presented themselves as representing the class, such as left-leaning bourgeois parties and trade unions (or industrial unions) that indulged in collusion with the employers and industrial peace in the interests of capital and the state. The founding of the AAUD was perhaps premature in this sense. (10)

In short, *What is to be done...* confronts the revolutionary milieu in Germany with the false choice between communisation, anti-authoritarian Marxism and anti-party council communism on the one hand, and Bolshevik party politics on the other, which, as the realisation of its secret 'maximum programme', can only end in state capitalism. I hope to have shown that the party tendency within council communism can still be a source of inspiration for the development of left communist activity through a supra-regional organisation based on a programme.

F.C. 2-11-2021 (correction of minor errors 26-11-2021).

Notes

(1) Katja Wagner, Lukas Egger, Marco Hamann, *What is to be done in times of weakness?* 16 October 2021.

(2) I would like to leave "communisation" as it is, an ideological mishmash to defend the interests of "intellectuals" who do not want to have the same right to consumption as workers after the revolution. For an overview of this discussion in Germany: *Some recent books on the period of transition*. Significantly, the article *What is to be done...* concludes with a call to put an end to the anti-Étatism of the social revolutionaries.

(3) The text in *Communaut* contains hints that this is at least a Trotskyist-inspired approach. For example, it is claimed that council communism developed in the struggle against Stalinism, whereas

it was a struggle against Bolshevism as a whole, advocated by Lenin and Trotsky in 1920, long before there was any talk of Stalinism. The frequent use of terms such as bureaucracy, control and democracy also points to Trotskyist influences. However, I will limit myself in this text to arguments for and against "What is to be done in times of weakness". For a critical analysis of Trotskyism from the point of view of the council communists, I refer to GIC, *Trotsky and Council Communism*.

(4) See Communistenbond 'Spartacus', *Taak en Wezen van de Nieuwe Partij* (1945) [Communist League 'Spartacus', Tasks and Characteristics of the New party].

(5) GIC, *Trotsky and Council Communism*.

(6) The article in *Communaut* nominally rejects the transitional programme because it is not clear how the prospect of a socialist society can arise from capitalism's inability to meet the transitional demands. However, the intention of Trotsky and earlier of the Comintern was that the transitional demands would help the communists, later the Trotskyists, to replace the "reformist" trade union and party leaders with themselves.

(7) Mattick, *Differences in the Councils Movement* - in *International Councils Correspondence* : Theoretical and Discussion Organ for the Councils Movement. - Issue. of the Group of International Communists, Holland. - 1936, nos. 16-17 (May); source of transcription: council communism , 23 November 2020, collaboration of Association Archives Antonie Pannekoek.

(8) See Franz Jung, *Arbeitslos - Arbeiter-Los!* (1919).

(9) See, among others, Antonie Pannekoek, *The economic necessity of imperialism* (1916) and there the recent discussions on the untenability of the ICS theory of the decay of capitalism.

(10) See *A Letter from Comrade Pannekoek*, July 1920, and further Roi Ferreiro *On unionism and its revolutionary overcoming*.