

No Mysticism in Times of Weakness

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In this reply to "What is to be done in times of weakness?" we point out some difficulties in the argumentation with which the comrades justify their plea for the party and the programme. The critique is intended to stimulate further questions around which our debate on strategy and organisation should revolve.

For the radical left, resolving the question of organisation is both the squaring of the circle and the holy grail. Solving it holds the promise of historically significant activity, ultimately of revolutionary upheaval; posing it always carries the danger of forcing processes of division, as the common denominator gradually crumbles. Now Lukas, Katja and Marco (hereafter LKM) have opened a new round with their text *What is to be done in times of weakness*, causing irritation not only among readers, (1) but also within the blog editorial team. An understanding of the pros and cons of the strategic proposal will not be easy for two reasons. Firstly, because of its provocative style. Slapping an anti-authoritarian band of Communauters in the face with the thesis that proletarian self-liberation is "inevitably linked to the form of the party" is - apart from the fact that the reasoning is not convincing - not very diplomatic. (2) Nevertheless, we'll try to give a reasonably calm response. And secondly, the text too often leaves us wondering. The expression of incomprehension is therefore not a rhetorical trick, but an expression of the fact that central concepts and theses remain unexplained or unfounded. As our internal debates have shown, this is probably at the core of the problems of understanding. Nevertheless, let's get into it.

The comrades begin with a diagnosis of the problem, which we can endorse on two essential points: Firstly, they note a lack of strategic guidance and planning in the social revolutionary milieu, and secondly, a limitedness of recent social struggles and movements. Correct strategic questions are raised, to which we indeed lack satisfactory answers:

- What is our role as communists in social struggles?
- How is the relationship of theoretical debate in small circles to political events to be determined?
- What "mediating steps" are necessary between the final goal (world commune) and current struggles?
- What conclusion does one draw from insights into the limitedness of the struggles of recent times? "What is to be done to overcome these limited forces of spontaneity?"

The milieu itself is held primarily responsible for the lack of perspective, as well as the persistence of the basic assumptions of council communism within it, i.e. a "system of coordinates in which organisations such as trade unions and workers' parties could only play a counterrevolutionary role [...]". Accordingly, the strategic "gap" is to be filled by questioning the basic assumptions of revolutionary theory of the council communists. The argument essentially runs through a reinterpretation of the history of early social democracy. The one-sidedness that the comrades allege against the communist critique of the party and its flight into the "mysticism of the masses" ultimately catches up with them under the opposite sign. Our critique begins with this interpretation of history, which, according to our reading, amounts to a neutralisation of the political form of the party {1.}. The critique of the council communist coordination system then leads to the proposal to close the strategic gap with rehabilitated means: party and programme. (3) They ultimately prove to be sham solutions {2.}. In conclusion, it seems necessary to point out that the lack of perspective is

neither *merely* self-inflicted, nor does it simply follow from the council communist system of coordinates {3.}. (4)

The extent to which this solution – to make a comment in advance – tends to relapse into authoritarianism is shown, for example, when the "necessity of a central political decision-making power" is emphasised (5) and the "problem of political leadership" or "political authority" is spoken of incessantly. What exactly should, and can, it mean to solve the problem of disorientation or uncertainty about the prevailing orientation in the working class through "leadership" and "authority"? What's more, there is talk of proletarian self-government replacing the bourgeois order in a "revolutionary crisis" - and this "new political authority" is "inevitably linked to the party as a form of political organisation". Proletarian self-government as the rule of the party? Or in what sense is the party "linked" to proletarian self-government? Not only does what Felix Klopotek has already said apply here: it's too vague to go on – but all anti-authoritarian alarm bells are also ringing.

1. Historical Neutralisation of the Party Form

The comrades question the council communist interpretation of the classical organisations of the workers' movement (parties and trade unions) and emphasise the role of social democracy in promoting revolution. They state: the revolutionary mass movements of the early 20th century would not have been at all possible without the organisational groundwork of the social democratic parties. And:

"The class-conscious members of the workers', soldiers' and sailors' councils in Petrograd and Moscow, who were instrumental in driving the October Revolution, had acquired their political consciousness in the Social Democratic Party and the trade unions."

The problem here is that the class-conscious party leaders who ordered the murder, arrest and crushing of the workers', soldiers' and sailors' councils, both in Russia and a short time later in Germany (key words: Spartacus, Ruhr struggles), had also acquired their consciousness in precisely this social-democratic movement. The positive and negative sides of social democracy, which are even named in places, remain completely unmediated by the comrades, (6) which in the end allows a one-sided focus on the positive role of the party. Through this one-sidedness, the forms of party and programme developed in early social democracy can be held up as an ideal to strive for - without discussing the question of how the integrating to counterrevolutionary role is related to these forms. Even Mike Macnair, the British CP intellectual to whom LKM refers, for example, admits that in the context of the period between 1918 and 1921, "the ideas of the minimal programme and the democratic republic - as social democrats understood them - played a directly counterrevolutionary role in mobilising the working class in support of the capitalist order". (7)

Drawing conclusions from the history of the workers' movement for today, in our view, only works if one asks why and how what began promisingly could end so cruelly - but the comrades say nothing about this (nor does Macnair). This would also have meant examining how the development of the workers' movement is shaped by social conditions. The historical view of the comrades is too limited to make us understand what actually led to the strengthening of the workers' movement and why the workers chose social democracy. Moreover, we learn nothing about the workers. Although the working class is the central point of reference for strategic considerations, the working and reproductive conditions under which they eked out a living are ultimately left out of LKM. How are we to understand how these people organised themselves and decided to fight back - and then went to war in their thousands to die for the fatherland? And how was it that many - not only in Germany - did so as social democrats? How could it be that others opposed the war and agitated against it from the beginning?

The problems associated with trying to understand the history of the workers' movement and its organisations from within itself are also evident elsewhere: spontaneous movements would not be able to get past the established organisations of the workers' movement even today.

"Far more likely is the scenario, confirmed again and again, according to which in such a situation [of spontaneous movement] the established mass organisations themselves would triumph over significant radical minorities within and outside these organisations. Be it in Germany in 1918/19, in France in 1968 or in Portugal in 1974/75 - despite huge mass movements, wildcat strikes and occupations, the established organisations managed to keep the upper hand and steer the movement into controlled channels. [...] [I]n a revolutionary crisis [the] existing class organisations [are] also strengthened, since they have already previously bound the struggling sections of the class to themselves and as organisations are able to exercise political power."

Not only does the counterrevolutionary violence of the organisations mentioned here disappear behind the euphemistic expression "steer in controlled channels", but once again what social conditions were present that helped them to win and what the consequences were that the established organisations kept the upper hand go completely missing. Thus, one can then allow oneself the strategic conclusion: because the existing class organisations are capable of exercising political power, they should not be left to the "forces loyal to the state". It does not occur to them that the ability to assert themselves in such a situation could be based on taking away the revolutionary peak of the movements. Fundamental dynamics are thus cut off and dissolved in favour of the organisations - and later in favour of the party. (8)

The forms of organisation thus become a neutral means, an empty shell within which revolutionary forces struggle against reformist and reactionary forces. For implicitly it seems that LKM want the negative developments to be understood only as a *political* defeat of the revolutionary forces within the mass organisations, not as a problem related to the form itself. They speak of "catastrophic political decisions", of the "political failure of the revolutionary tendency", which is "reified into something inevitable" in the council communist critique of the mass organisation. Unfortunately, little is then done to clarify the question of how the victory of the reformist or reactionary forces could be avoided. The conceded "integrative tendency" is reduced to a moment of "bureaucratic rule". Unfortunately, the forces that bind us to the existing are much more perfidious than mere bureaucracy. All too often, it is the promise of making a difference for the better in the here and now with the help of existing, established and powerful organisations and institutions - the swearing in and swinging towards the politically oh-so-necessary compromise, a partial victory that must be held on to - that lures the resistant movements back into the bosom of order. In this context, the forms of organisation always help determine how political disputes can be fought out, which faction has structural advantages and disadvantages, etc. Different organisational forms are subject to different social-objective constraints and determine how they are dealt with within the organisation. The form of the party is by no means innocent because of this structural selectivity - in view of historical experience and the insights of state theory, which are widely shared in the milieu at least according to the state of discussion so far, the burden of proof that the party can play a positive role in the process of social revolution (in the long term) lies with those who demand it, not the other way round - a burden the comrades' text cannot support. Just because social democracy has also contributed its share to a revolutionary intensification in the past does not mean that the council communist critique of the form of the party is passé - and certainly not the state-theoretical warning against the integrative power of this form.

2. Party and Programme

The comrades also leave it largely open what exactly they mean by "party". This is particularly annoying because it is the attempt to rehabilitate the party, or more precisely the "revolutionary

mass party", as the *only* political organisation that would enable the class to act autonomously and thus lead it out of the present misery that irritates us most. This overturns much of what was previously considered the basic consensus within the anti-authoritarian milieu. The "building of a political organisation with a programme" which is recommended as a longer-term point of orientation; a communist organisation which is to "take up the anti-authoritarian communist tradition's critique of the past organisational attempts of the workers' parties" and discuss "which democratic mechanisms are necessary to counteract tendencies of bureaucratisation and independence of individual interests" - all this would certainly be less controversial if this organisation were not ultimately reduced to the form of the party. At the same time, when it comes to the party, its central place is merely asserted, not substantiated. It states:

"For only a party, in a revolutionary crisis and the intensification of the class struggle, can form, on the basis of its programme, the organisational and political coherence necessary to put in place of the old order a new Commune."

Not a word about why and how. And in view of what the comrades themselves have previously written, one wonders: where do they get this certainty from? Neither did the Paris Commune need the party to enter the stage of history, (9) nor is the thesis supported by the self-told history of social democratic or communist parties.

Nowadays, anyone who speaks of a "party" can be sure that their counterpart understands something that has to do not only with political camps or currents, but with legal form, party book, statutes and involvement in the parliamentary game. But that is not what the comrades mean - at least not necessarily. They deliberately left open the question of whether the envisaged type of party should play in the parliamentary game at all or not. But what is left of a "party" if it does not? The answer: the programme. For the comrades, the core of the concept of party seems to be that it is an organisation that pursues a *political* programme. (10) Specifically, they argue for the format of the minimal-maximal programme. It cannot simply be a matter of revolutionary maximalism, instead a minimal programme is needed that links "the development of a political alternative with the day-to-day struggles of the proletarianised". It should aim at "inner-capitalist reforms" that would "strengthen the defensive and offensive forces of the working class vis-à-vis capital to such an extent that it would be able to implement the maximum programme of overcoming capital and the bourgeois state."

However, the comrades do not give much more detailed information on what exactly this programme format is all about. Therefore, in the following we will refer to the texts they have given, in which this format is explained in more detail. (11) What functions can a programme fulfil? The plural is important here too, because there are different points of reference.

Programme and Movement

In relation to spontaneously emerging *movements*, it seems to be about having a clear socialist position that others can join - or not. In downturns, the programme is supposed to fulfil the function of rallying the already socialist-oriented forces behind it ("own programme [of the communist] [...] which could serve as a rallying point for resistance against capital") - but what is to be done with these forces? How could the minimal programme overcome the "external relationship to the movements" which has been criticised? Presumably by trying to show, by means of agitation, that the demands of the movements are also the demands of the programme. Do other left-wing parties promise otherwise? Why should this programme attract more people to its own side than, for example, the programme of Die Linke, the DKP or the MLPD?

This question points to a central blank spot in the comrades' strategic thinking: Their theses refer primarily to what the party and programme *should* be able to achieve; they refer to an *idea* of the

programme - not to the *praxis* that would be necessary to implement it. However, the political programme, its individual demands and its goals (building class power) themselves are far from being synonymous with their practical implementation. How is this implementation conceived? If it is about something other than the parliamentary game, is it about making demands on the state - which is always necessary in the context of inner-capitalist reforms - and trying to implement them extra-parliamentarily? Either way, it would be essential to consider not only the minimal programme itself, but that it is *precisely the practical necessities and the political power dynamics that go hand in hand with the attempt to implement it* that are the gateway for everything that leads back to the ground of existing rule. In any case, a programme will only gain traction if the route to its implementation seems realistic - but it always seems most realistic to make use of the existing apparatuses.

Programme and Consciousness

Another function of the programme is *consciousness raising*. Donald Parkinson, another stalwart of the programme format, concretises the connection between programme and the consciousness of the masses thus:

"The aim of a programme should not be simply to give expression to the masses' popular demands, but also to introduce revolutionary demands into mass politics. Often demands will be expectedly at odds with popular consciousness; the programme should be an educational tool to explain the necessary steps for real socialist change."

And further:

"By refusing to take up only demands which are already popular and therefore feasible in the short term (such as that for a people's militia), the party is forced to fight for its convictions among the masses and to present the need for revolution instead of mere reform." (12)

The programme is also touted by LKM as a guide for the disoriented masses. At the very least, the party and the programme are the essential answers to the "decisive question, under which conditions the working class becomes revolutionary, or, more concretely, under which conditions it can gain consciousness of its own interests as a class and develop the capacities to revolutionise society in its own terms". But how it contributes to the self-acting consciousness raising of the (moved and unmoved) masses to present them with a minimum-maximum programme remains a mystery. (13) The historical templates to which reference is made explain precious little, since they are, after all, merely catalogues of *demands*. (14) So here too, nowhere is it explained how the programme - among others than those who formulated and signed it - can achieve the feat of consciousness raising. In practice, this could mean: those who already have affinities with socialism join it (if they don't choose another socialist product in the political warehouse after all), those who don't, don't.

Minimum-Maximum Programme and Two-Phase Model of Revolution

Implicitly, with the concept of the minimum-maximum programme, the comrades are referring to an old, orthodox Marxist idea of revolution, which is wonderfully orderly. Step one: conquest of political power (dictatorship of the proletariat) as a prolonged class struggle, but within which the dominated class now rules over the ruling class; step two: building communism. This is also the model on which Marx's first minimal-maximal programme was based. (15) Marx's model for the political transformation and thus for the conquest of political power is thereby the Paris Commune. The division into minimum and maximum programme refers to the two phases of the revolution. The demands of the minimum programme are supposed to be composed in such a way that they would not each individually entail a revolutionisation of the capitalist order, but would together in their totality.

"Unless we believe that the revolution itself will produce communist relations of production - as the obscure French pamphleteer Gilles Dauvé and other left radicals claim - the separation of minimum and maximum is not an arbitrary one, but clarifies the process of revolution." (16)

Whether such a conception of revolution is still relevant today, or ever was, is highly questionable. Dividing the revolution into two steps may seem clearer in theory, but in practice it is a pseudo-clarity. There is a danger of trimming struggles over relations of production in phase one to such an extent that they serve first the goal of pushing through the inner-capitalist reforms. What seems clear to us above all is the historical fact that the two-phases did not work either. Already for Marx's model it can be said that it "underestimates the inherent dynamics of political relations of power and violence". (17) And: to apply the idea of the conquest of political power, as inspired by the Paris Commune, to today's conditions is hardly likely to prove realistic.

What this connection between the programme and the idea of revolution, which remains implicit with the comrades, shows, however, is that there is a great need for clarification here. In any case, they hit a sore spot when they point out that today we lack an idea of what social revolution could look like. What does it mean for our strategy of transformation if we say goodbye to the simple order of the two-phase model?

The belief surfacing now and then that a better world is possible was still largely intact at the turn of the century, the promise of social revolution not yet broken, the relapse into barbarism not a real experience. Today, the belief that a *better* world is *possible* has been replaced by the realisation that a *different* world is *necessary*. But no one knows how to set it up, so hardly anyone believes in the possibility of a radical break. This is where the misery of a lack of perspective begins - this shit goes deep.

In the end, the party and programme remain largely slogans for the comrades, which promise strategic clarity but cannot keep this promise. They write in the last paragraph of their debate opener:

"As comprehensible and consistent as the criticism of the parties by council communism is - it too has so far been unable to resolve the contradiction between organisation and spontaneity, between bureaucracy and democracy, between leadership and the masses, and has thus ended up in a dead end. By rejecting proletarian organisations, it resolves the contradiction only on one side and can only hope that the necessary class consciousness will arise from the spontaneous mass movements themselves. In this it falls into a mysticism of the masses, which has always been inherent in this current."

In the end, however, they simply resolve the contradiction to the other side and replace the "mysticism of the masses" with a mysticism of party and programme. Their point of reference is not the historical *reality*, but the *idea* of party and programme. They simply want to retain the positive of the organisation, the party, without having to drag the negative along.

Precisely because the social revolution is about a socially *comprehensive* process, the very idea that a particular organisation or form of organisation can decisively advance it seems problematic to us. This does not mean that we reject organisations or consider any kind of programme to be superfluous or even dangerous - no organisation can do without a certain kind of programme - but rather that we should start from the necessity of different forms of organisation, to reflect on the respective constraints and contradictions in which they are entangled, and to think about the pitfalls that are connected to the practical implementation of the respective demands.

3. Objective Conditions of the Present

The relationship between power and powerlessness has become so acute today that the more urgent it becomes, the less possible a way out seems. The attempt to understand the present objective conditions that condemn us to powerlessness must be the starting point of our strategy debate. However, these conditions are only mentioned by the comrades in two subordinate sentences ("fragmentation and atomisation", "deindustrialisation and the emergence of new forms of labour") - and, as we said, they do not play a role in the historical discussion either. Of course, we have to discuss which strategic mistakes were made historically and how the scattered social revolutionary forces can be brought together and strengthened more effectively today. However, an argument that primarily tries to understand the development of the (communist) workers' movement and the social revolutionary milieu's lack of perspective from within itself is not sufficient for this.

The lack of perspective is not only to do with the subjective inability to overcome council communist principles, but also with the *objective conditions* of the present. These include not only changed political-economic conditions (such as shifts in the dynamics of valorisation, in international competition, in the disciplining of the welfare state, etc.) and the new relevance of the ecological crisis, the strength of the conservative and counterrevolutionary forces or the experience of the integration of the old organisations of the workers' movement into the ruling apparatus. It also includes the damage that social democracy and so-called really existing socialism have done to the possibility and ability to imagine a better future. And among many other things, it also includes the scepticism that the younger social movements have towards these forms of organisation. (18) The fact that despite the global increase in class conflicts in the last decade, the old forms of organisation of the workers' movement have not experienced an upswing is something that needs to be explained. This circumstance is addressed by the comrades themselves with regard to the yellow vests:

"Although those involved distinguished themselves very sharply from the professional political establishment and institutionalised organisations, they did not manage, apart from a few riots, to counter the bourgeois forms of politics with anything, because the desire for immediate democratic forms remained without content and goal."

They also write:

"The experiences of the proletarian struggles of the last decades speak a clear language: they showed that the wage-dependent class can constantly mobilise astonishing forces without thereby achieving anything. Despite participation in protests that the world has probably never seen on such a scale and cycles of struggle that have lasted longer than usual, the rule of the bourgeoisie is less threatened than ever. The question now is what conclusion to draw from this assessment about the limited nature of the struggles."

Indeed. But the conclusion that the comrades draw is not comprehensible to us. It is not a promising strategy to try to make these movements happy with the very form of organisation that they reject. It would have been more interesting to spell out what it could mean to "reflect and push forward as innovations in the class struggle" the "spontaneous and autonomous forms of organisation", these current "testimonies of proletarian self-activity", which have been produced by the recent movements from Chile to Cairo to Paris. What possibilities are there for left communist forces to take up the after all quite welcome scepticism towards the official political establishment, instead of making the form of the party palatable to them again?

As important as it is to deal with the history of the workers' movement and its defeats, the discussion of meaningful strategies must still start from the "concrete analysis of a concrete situation" (19). If it does not do so, it threatens to degenerate into a mere dispute over direction, which only leads to

renewed splits and the formation of factions that are once again out of proportion to actual social movement.

Notes

(1) See the interjections by Felix Klopotek and Fredo Corvo.

(2) All quotations not shown are taken from the text *What is to be done in times of weakness?*

(3) It would be worth a separate discussion to critically examine the comrades' historical leap from early social democracy to the present. After all, a capitalist normality has by no means rolled through the 20th century that is the same then as now - the experience not only of Stalinism, but also of fascism and National Socialism, which helped to establish a turning away from the proletariat, especially on the radical left in Germany, must not be excluded from the theory of revolution, and must not be skipped over historically. This should only be mentioned in passing. Read maliciously, the comrades' proposal as a whole can be understood as if they wanted to skip the devastation of more than a century of capitalist social history in order to find refuge in a revolutionary optimism that could still be legitimately cultivated around 1900. The problem is that it is precisely through their one-sided view of history that they empty the categories of organisation, party, leadership, authority and political power of the negative historical content with which they have become saturated in the course of the 20th century.

(4) Aside from the fact that council communism was not as hostile to organisation as it is portrayed - the same applies, incidentally, to the anarchist tradition of the workers' movement (cf. Philippe Kellermann: *Zur Organisationsdebatte im klassischen Anarchismus*, in: Marcus Hawel, Stefan Kalmring (eds.), *Wie lernt das linke Mosaik? Die plurale Linke in Bewegung*, VSA Hamburg 2016, pp. 179-195).

(5) This "necessity of a central political decision-making power" is justified by Marx's assumption, based on the Paris Commune, that instead of the bourgeois state it needed an "own violence, opposed to the oppressors and organised against them" (MEW 17: 543). However, this does not add up. On the one hand, Marx does not at all speak of a centralised violence at this point, but rather of one taken back by "the masses of the people themselves"; on the other hand, it is precisely a violence directed against the oppressors, whereas LKM can be understood as also being concerned with the exercise of an "alternative political authority" vis-à-vis the proletariat.

(6) This lack of mediation is expressed, for example, in the statement that even the "more radical sections of the workers movement had their origins in those same mass organisations - regardless of the integrating role they were able to exercise at the same time."

(7) Mike Macnair, *Transitional to What*.

(8) Moreover, one wonders: what should it mean concretely for our strategic orientation today to struggle for such organisations? Entryism - the (covert) takeover of an organisation from within - is not far off the mark.

(9) We mention the Paris Commune here because it serves LKM as well as Macnair as a model for what they call the conquest of political power, for which the party is indispensable (see also below).

(10) What implications this emphasis on the political has precisely in its separation or relation to the economic would also be worth a separate discussion.

(11) See endnote 24 in *What is to be done in times of weakness?* These texts also miss two substantive points: first, there is no serious questioning of why the social democracy of the Second International ultimately integrated itself loyally to the state and what role the programme format

might have played in this; second, the statements about what the present situation has in common with the situation of early social democracy remain very thin and superficial. In *Why Have a Political Program* McQueeney only writes: "In many respects, the US left today is in a similar position to German social democracy at the time of the Erfurt Congress. After decades of oppression both achieved some successes that seemed unthinkable - at least to the ruling class - and neither had ever gained significant power. But above all, the SPD of 1891 and the American left of 2018 are united by one urgent task: the uniting of workers into a class-for-itself, conscious of their common situation and interests."

(12) Donald Parkinson: *The Revolutionary Minimum-Maximum Programme*.

(13) McQueeney appropriately also refers to the role of the party schools of the SPD for this task, a reference missing from the comrades: "What is a working class institution? Historically, they were often a reflection of bourgeois republican institutions, but within the class party. A good example of this are the party schools of the SPD. Every class party needs political education; it is a futile enterprise to try to recruit the working masses without internal political clarification and cadre-building - aimed not at uncritical acceptance of party dogmatism but at the correct application of the historical-materialist method and critical analysis to the day-to-day struggles of the workers."

(14) The German translation of the first minimal programme, written by Marx together with Engels and Jules Guesde, can be found in: MEW 19: 570f.

(15) Cf. Donald Parkinson: *The Revolutionary Minimum-Maximum Programme*.

(16) Ibid.

(17) Hendrik Wallat: *Neither State nor Collective. Socialismuskritik im Werk von Karl Marx*, in: Prokla 155, 2009, p. 275.

(18) Some may chalk this up to a subjective factor, but since it is an initial condition beyond our immediate control, this 'state of consciousness' is here counted among the objective conditions of our strategic considerations.

(19) Lenin, *Werke vol. 31*, 154.