

Notes on the Organisation and Strategy Debate

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This reply to the debate on strategy and organisation argues for not getting lost in the argument about the interpretation of the history of the workers' movement, but for concentrating on the present conditions. Even if there is hardly an independent movement of wage workers at present, communists should overcome sectarianism, strive for unity in an organisation, and link demands of current day politics with the long-term goals of social revolution.

Preface

If the discussion started here on organisation and strategy is primarily about how history is to be interpreted, there is unlikely to be an agreement by the end of it. What is needed is an understanding of how to assess the current situation here and now - especially in Germany. As a "historians' dispute", the organising and strategy debate runs the risk, in my view, of becoming one of the familiar disputes over direction, in which organising and movement fetishists, Kautskyites and anti-Kautskyites, etc., might be pitted against each other and the battles of the past fought for the umpteenth time. From my point of view, it is not so much a question of searching for historical models, but rather of giving an account of the far-reaching changes in the capitalist mode of production and the corresponding forms of bourgeois class society. Only if we succeed in this can we find promising approaches for the organisation and strategy of communists today. It should be clear to all those involved that we communists today are not the product of a rapidly spreading and in significant parts radicalising "proletarian movement", as was the case in the second half of the 19th century or in the 1920s. (Today, wage workers in industrial enterprises in this country, for example, are largely "liberated" from any communist thought and action!) It is almost exclusively a certain continuity of the theoretical critique of "capitalism" - and by no means of the practical "proletarian movement" - through which certain communist sects persist and new groupings repeatedly emerge. The question of the organisation and politics of communists today is not raised by the developing and radicalising struggles of wage workers! It arises first of all only as a task of overcoming a petrified sectarianism that excludes any development.

I

Since in their text Katja, Marco and Lukas make a vigorously historical argument for the orientation towards certain forms of organisation, I also want to comment briefly on this: however one thinks about parties, trade unions, cooperatives and councils, historically they were all clearly a product of the international proletarian movement. The results of this development that we are dealing with today are sobering. The parties, trade unions and cooperatives are largely integrated and "state-supporting". The councils always existed only for a short time or, in the Soviet Union or even in Yugoslavia itself, became a distorted image of the "finally discovered political form under which the economic emancipation of labour can take place" (Marx) and communist relations of production.

Against this background, to fundamentally reject the organisation in a political party or in a trade union and to refer positively to councils as a guarantor for successful social emancipation is, in my view, not at all possible. The councils are no less placed in question by the practice of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia than the other forms of wage workers' organisation. The organisational form of the councils, like any other form of organisation, offers no guarantee of successful social emancipation. Councils can become independent from the movement of wage workers in the same way as political parties and trade unions. But to conclude from this that every formal organisation is the devil's work is, in my opinion, fatal.

Just as a certain form of organisation cannot guarantee success in the class struggle and successful social emancipation, the critique of certain forms of organisation cannot explain the wretched state of today's "workers' movement". In Germany at least, it is more stagnation than movement. In my view, the causes of today's situation are very complex: the result of betrayals, of devastating defeats, of concessions by the ruling class, of the enormous development of the productive power of labour, of the equally impressive growth of capital after the Second World War based not least on this. In addition, especially in Germany, there are the lasting ideological effects of National Socialism and actually existing socialism - shaping the prevailing ideology of anti-communism even among wage workers.

In any case, the class consciousness of wage workers in Germany has sunk to an unimaginably low level. Accordingly, class struggles specifically about the concrete organisation of wage labour (wages, working hours, pensions, etc.) are poorly developed. Attacks such as Agenda 2010 have remained basically unanswered by the class of wage workers. In this respect, there is de facto no movement of wage workers that demands and generates independent organisation. There is certainly no movement among wage workers that demands revolutionary organisation.

What communist organisation there is today in developed capitalist countries like Germany is still the product of movements, but it is not the product of an independent movement among wage workers. Ultimately, what communist organisation there is today goes back to the student and youth movement at the end of the 1960s. Before that, there was hardly any communist literature available in post-war West Germany. This movement created the breakthrough from which the communist sects still draw today. (Let us remember, for example, the breaking of the ban on the KPD and the associated persecution of communist agitation, etc. This ban was not directed specifically against Marxist-Leninist agitation, but against any agitation that sought to establish a "dictatorship of the proletariat" and to eliminate private ownership of the means of production. The extent of this persecution after the Second World War in the FRG is impressively described, for example, by Heinrich Hannover, a lawyer who defended activists of the Stalinist CP at the time).

II

The Communist Manifesto states:

"The workers begin to form combinations against the bourgeois; they club together to keep up the rate of wages; they form permanent associations in order to make provision beforehand for these occasional revolts. Here and there, the contest breaks out into riots. Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. *The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers.*" (1)

This was written in 1848, when the modern, international workers' movement had barely developed, and was impressively confirmed by the movement's growth up to the First World War. The fruit of the movement lay less in the victories than the "*expanding union of the workers*". The class consciousness that wage workers developed under the influence of the increasingly strong social democratic movement (for example, through newspapers, speeches, leaflets and educational work) was not uniformly and consistently revolutionary, but it was also revolutionary. It did not prevent participation in the first imperialist world war. But without this revolutionary class consciousness developed "in the bosom of social democracy", the revolutions with communist tendencies in Russia and Germany would not have taken place. (2) Social democracy before the First World War was an expression of the political organisation of the class precisely because it united the most important currents in the workers' movement in one organisation.

III

The quoted statement from Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto is not only important for the revolutionary perspective, but also for every larger or smaller conflict between wage labour and capital in individual workplaces. At least that is what I have learned in my limited but relatively numerous experiences. Most of these disputes do not achieve what the wage workers want. They end in defeat or compromise. And because this is the case, people come together who want to continue the struggle, even for comparatively "petty" demands through which wage workers want to assert their needs. They organise themselves beyond the immediate struggle. As soon as such struggles gain momentum and a larger number of people take part, the question of using existing organisations, such as the shop stewards' body of a trade union or the works council, arises. If they are even reasonably intense, the disputes will be reflected in a change in the composition of the shop stewards' body or the works council. Every movement, if it is at least a rudimentarily independent movement of wage workers, does not give a damn about what revolutionaries think about trade unions and works councils, whether they reject them in principle or not.

So, based on my knowledge of history and based on my experience, I assume that it is decided through and in the struggles of wage workers which existing organisation they use and which new ones they develop. If wage workers are not actively fighting for their interests, such questions of organisation do not arise. If wage workers do not fight for their interests, it is because of objective working and living conditions and a subjective lack of class consciousness, not because the process has been short-circuited simply by the bourgeois character of their organisations. It is as if these organisations were the only thing keeping the wage workers who are actually ready to fight from fighting against capital.

This, of course, does not exclude the possibility that the "social partnership" character of the organisations has a negative effect on the development of class consciousness. Precisely when one refers positively to the self-enlightenment of the masses, one should also take into account that the failure of this self-enlightenment shapes the character of their organisations. The self-enlightenment of the masses does not begin with the revolution. This revolution and its prospect of success depends decisively on the extent to which the self-enlightenment of the masses has already led to certain changes in consciousness before the revolution. The perspective of social emancipation, the overturning of the relations of production, will only prevail in the revolution if, in the "peaceful" run-up to it, a social-revolutionary current, so to speak subliminally, gains a decisive influence on the thinking of the masses. Without a firm organisation of communists and a good, continuous practice of this organisation, the events will come to nothing. A social revolution must be prepared not only objectively but also subjectively. If it is not, then the revolution ends in defeat ... and so far only the defeats remain.

IV

Paul Mattick had a clear position on the question of organisation in the context of social revolution. He wrote:

"It is indeed not possible to build revolutionary mass organisations under capitalism, since it is their organisational success itself that destroys the original revolutionary ideology. Revolutionary organisations, in order to remain such, must keep themselves free from the ordinary politics of the day, but this in turn hinders their own development. The dilemma of the workers' movement thus seems insoluble, since both active participation in the given social practice and its principled negation lead to revolutionary disempowerment. This dilemma can only be escaped through the spontaneous formation of revolutionary organisations, which cannot last within capitalism. In other words, it is the spontaneous organisation of the revolution itself that can solve the dilemma of the revolutionary movement under capitalism."(3)

And elsewhere he states, even more fundamentally:

"If capitalism develops and lives "blindly", the revolution against capitalism can also only take place "blindly". A different view breaks through historical materialism."

As much as I appreciate Paul Mattick as a critic of political economy, I do not think much of his political positions. (4) For this reason, and because in the '28 Theses on Classless [sic] Class Society' in the first issue of Kosmoprolet there are formulations that go in the same direction, I gave a paper at Eiszeit in Zurich a long time ago in which I criticised this. This resulted in a controversy.

In the theses, it says, for example:

"For the scattered malcontents who come together in communist circles in dismal times and occasionally compose long theses, this means [...] that they must refuse to proceed tactically, to court 'credibility' and to curry favour with others by means of 'realistic' programmes in order to transcend their separation from the mass of wage-labourers..."

Such sentences made me hesitate for a long time whether it made any sense at all to formulate a critique of these theses. After all, my whole organised and unorganised practice was characterised by courting "credibility", by helping to develop and promote "realistic" programmes. "Realistic" for me meant class-struggle, but not necessarily revolutionary measures. This enabled me to support current struggles and to at least partially overcome the "separation from the mass of wage-labourers" where I was active. If a "perceptible" pole of social revolutionaries is to be created, then in any case it is not at all possible to stay out of "ordinary day-to-day politics". Since the initiatives from Leipzig and Zurich in the Corona pandemic, this is probably also old news. When I expressed my astonishment about this in one of the milieu's mail distribution lists, a comrade from Zurich replied to me with the follows, among other things:

"1. The case that revolutionaries are not allowed to make demands on the state has long since been forgotten. The only question is in what form you address the Moloch, i.e. whether you make a petition and formally submit it, or organise demonstrations at which people of course demand that you should get as much money as possible from the state if you lose your job.

2. I would like to discuss the whole thing again calmly, how reforms and revolution are connected. How to move within it, etc. But at the moment everything is incredibly urgent, especially in view of the fact that neighbourhood initiatives are springing up everywhere where people can act. So it seems appropriate to me to make radical demands (the present ones are a total rush job) and popularise them in these initiatives."

I sensed in the comrade's email an earnest effort to overcome the vexed separation of wage-workers by intervening in day-to-day politics and formulating specific demands. I was very pleased about that. I was surprised because I didn't notice when, how and with which arguments the old argument was abandoned. This also applies to the authors of 'What is to be done in times of weakness.'

In my view, the problem of maintaining the revolutionary character of an organisation cannot be solved by staying out of day-to-day politics and not making demands on the state. As far as I can see, Mattick himself did not stick to his guidelines so consistently. (He was very active in the unemployed movement in the USA in the 1930s and would hardly have remembered this time so positively if he had only talked about revolution and communism there). The revolutionary character of an organisation can only be preserved if it succeeds in combining intervention in day-to-day politics - in the form of concrete criticism of capitalist conditions and agitation for certain demands in the interests of wage workers - with the long-term goals of social revolution in such a way that these communist goals always remain the highest guiding principle. This should be expressed in a corresponding programme and organisational practice. It is not easy to achieve this, and the philosopher's stone has yet to be discovered, but if this is not possible then there is no prospect of

change. In my view, the form of the organisation is not the problem, but rather this relationship to an organised praxis.

V

But back to the current situation as I see it and what needs to be done: today there is almost nothing of what characterised the old workers' movement and we are, so to speak, thrown back to a point before the beginning of an independent movement of wage labourers. On top of that, we have the burden of seriously undesirable historical developments on our shoulders. There are hardly any struggles and there are no newspapers, speeches, leaflets, and no educational work among wage workers by an effectively functioning organisation of communists that would be able to awaken and develop class consciousness on a broad scale. I don't even want to talk about a convincing theoretical presentation to justify communism scientifically. There is patchwork and sectarianism everywhere.

From all this it follows that for me, at the moment, independent organisations of the class, be it in the form of a political party, class-struggle trade union, cooperatives or even councils, are out of touch with the present. Whether the groups and individuals who run Communaut now decide to reject or to raise to the skies certain historical forms of militant workers' organisation is immediately practically irrelevant. In any case, this should not turn into one of the usual disputes about direction, in order to say goodbye to each other indignantly as soon as they have begun. The forms of organisation will be decided by the movement of the wage workers themselves. If the class movement fails to materialise, then its political organisation will also fail to materialise, no matter what form it takes! and one cannot replace this political organisation of the class by the action of political sects.

Even "anti-authoritarian communists" should, under the special conditions of today, concentrate on making a contribution to overcoming miserable sectarianism. Even small organisations do not have to cultivate it! Even if one seriously wants to do so, enough practical tasks full of reformist and other pitfalls arise.

With Communaut, an instrument has been created with which this link I spoke of could succeed. The editors' statement is a good start, but I do not yet see a plan for systematic theoretical and political work.

VI

Katja, Marco and Lukas have criticised above all the "worship of spontaneity" through council communism. To this Felix Klopotek critically remarked in his reply:

"Also annoying is the ostentatious misunderstanding when WEH get worked up over the assumption that "the proletarian masses should, in a chaotic, spontaneous process of all things, form a revolutionary consciousness and a clarity about their political interests that will enable them to overturn society". What exactly is chaotic about a strike movement? In an occupation of a square or a militant demonstration? The opposite is true: everyone knows how to move, in these situations of uprising everyone does the right thing, as if by themselves, people rise above themselves and the fearful are suddenly courageous. These events are only "chaotic" from a very specific point of view: because they cannot be prolonged, because they cannot be planned. They cannot be conserved, and that triggers fear in observers: what will tomorrow bring? This fear speaks from the entire text: sublimated to the vague hope of finding a guarantee formula with which one can make movements permanent, transform their sudden flare-ups into politics and a programme in order to prevent their equally sudden decline."

If you read the book by Richard Müller - one of the revolutionary leaders - about the November Revolution in Germany, you get an impression of the chaotic course of this revolution. That everyone there did the right thing as if by themselves would be a bold assertion!!!

I myself was only present at three quite different strikes: as a supporter at the Opel strike in 1973, as an employed machinist at the Mönninghoff factory occupation in 1983, and as a student and "strike leader" at the strike in the sports institute of Bochum University in the mid-1970s. In none of these situations did everyone do the right thing by themselves. In each case it took great effort to prevent the "spontaneous" breaking of strikes by colleagues and to resist the measures of the reaction. In all these cases, even the best activists were inexperienced and often did not know what is to be done next. In all these cases, not only were the fearful suddenly courageous, but the courageous were suddenly fearful. Klopotek's sentences speak of an idealisation of struggle and spontaneity and this view is the basis of his criticism of Marco, Katja and Lukas' text and the basis of his attitude to the question of organisation.

There is no doubt that spontaneity is an irreplaceable element in the class struggle. From a communist perspective, it is one of the objective conditions under which the activity of communists makes sense at all. It is a reaction to grievances that are perceived as intolerable or unacceptable. Agitation by radicalised minorities, however, usually plays a decisive role for the growth of indignation that eventually leads to struggles.

If the spontaneous acts of struggle do not become conscious acts of struggle in which radical needs are articulated and corresponding goals are formulated and agreed upon, then spontaneity ends in caterwauling and never in a social revolution. In the articulation of these radical needs and the formulation of goals, consciousness is expressed, which is never the direct result of spontaneity, but the result of reflection and discussion based on it. This process towards conscious action takes place in the struggle of opinions among wage workers and the different political currents. All this can be learned from history. (Many of the actions/strikes described as spontaneous by outsiders are often essentially initiated by organised minorities. But they are always independent actions of wage workers, whether the initiators are social reformists/anarchists/syndicalists or communists).

The question that communists today ask themselves is simply whether - in view of the barely developed spontaneous class struggles which serve as a necessary condition for social revolution - they want to wait and even trust that everyone will then do the right thing of their own accord, or whether they understand that the struggle for social emancipation cannot and will not work in this way. If communists have understood this, then they must enable themselves to engage in radical, but also comprehensible criticism and articulate radical needs, which in capitalism always amounts to the formulation of certain demands. The organisation that communists give themselves for this purpose must be designed in such a way that it enables them to actively promote class consciousness, to formulate goals and to establish the possibility of communism from the critique of the conditions. Ultimately, this organisation must also enable people to be active in an organised way in all areas of society! The latter, of course, is not a demand that can be made of the groups and individuals who run Communaut today. The number of activists is far too small for that, and there is no basis in terms of content. But one can dream of such an organisation and strive for it.

Notes

(1) MEW 4, p. 470f.

(2) The fact that quite different currents of thought developed "in the bosom of international social democracy" has been worked out by Zeev Sternhell in his book *The Emergence of Fascist Ideology*. These are developments specifically in France and Italy and they are associated with names like Sorel, Mussolini and others. The strong development of the working class movement in the second

half of the 19th century also provoked the emergence of different theoretical currents within the developing socialist international. The theoretical disputes initially took place within the parties of this socialist international, which for many years were parties in which quite different currents formed and fought against each other.

(3) Paul Mattick, *Leninism and the Labour Movement of the West*, in: Lenin. Revolution and Politics. Essays by Paul Mattick, Bernd Rabehl, Yuri Tynyavov and Ernest Mandel, Frankfurt am Main, 1970.

(4) As far as his understanding of historical materialism formulated here is concerned ("blind" historical process), this still goes far beyond schematism as it had its home in the 2nd International. To elaborate on this here would go beyond the scope of these theses.