



WORKING CLASS, PARTY AND COUNCILS.

*A reflection on the revolutionary process
and the communist perspective.*

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This text originated from a collective thought within the Anti-Capitalism and Revolution Tendency in the Italian Workers' Communist Party [PCL], although it is signed only by a comrade who edited it. This theoretical reflection occurred during a contentious conflict that arose with the party's majority during and after the V Congress (2019), focusing on the party's structure and its mass intervention. This contribution has subsequently become a cornerstone of ControVento. As such, we are presenting it today in an English version.

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As part of the *Anti-Capitalism and Revolution Tendency*, over the past two years we have consistently emphasized the contradictory and dialectical relationship between working class and party. The events of the twentieth century have highlighted the crucial role of the party. This collective subject is an organized vanguard with the political project to establish a new mode of production by seizing power and employing the State to reshape social relations. This perspective is the fruit of Lenin's contribution and the concrete path of Bolshevism. Simultaneously, the historical experience has highlighted the fundamental role played by the antagonism between capital and labor, which manifests and organizes itself within conflicts in the production processes, nurturing an anti-capitalist inclination among the working class. It is precisely this disposition and widespread radicalism among the masses of workers that enable the overthrow of the current established order. Without it, the political determination to transform the existing system risks being merely a subjective intention: a *spirit* that interprets history, driven by necessary illusions and vanguard tendencies. The Bolshevik experience itself has illustrated how, following the seizure of power, an improper relationship between working class and revolutionary party can lead to potential Bonapartist degenerations. This is evident in the Thermidorian shift, the establishment of the Stalinist regime, the consolidation of a degenerated workers' state, and the post-World War II bureaucratic *regulation* of all revolutionary paths. This contradictory relationship is therefore critical for any revolutionary process, both before and after the acquisition of power. The importance of this relationship is particularly accentuated today, amidst one of the major crises shaping the history of capitalism and considering the ongoing decomposition and fragility of the vanguard, where revolts and revolutions face challenges in initiating transitional processes.

THE WORKING CLASS AND HIS TECHNICAL, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL COMPOSITION

The struggle against this mode of production is initiated within the processes of production. In the contemporary world, a global capitalist market has firmly established itself, exerting dominance over various social formations assimilated into its unequal and combined development. Undoubtedly, a segment of the population remains involved in self-production or local markets (such as agricultural and artisanal sectors), somewhat detached from overarching production relations. This reality is particularly evident in poor and often dependent peripheral social formations. However, similar patterns occasionally emerge in niches and interstices within capitalist metropolises. Furthermore, certain formations may still maintain relationships that seemingly retain pre-capitalist, semi-feudal, or semi-slave-like attributes. Nevertheless, all these diverse social structures are fundamentally shaped by the production of goods and their global exchange. Commoditization have penetrated these realities and provide essential survival requisites or significantly enhancing people's quality of life (from energy resources to medical provisions, from transportation to communications). The essential workforce, both in metropolises and semi-peripheries, is thereby integrated into processes of capital valorization. Commodities resulting from their labour are traded to amass profits: a surplus beyond the initial investment to create them. [That is ([Marx, 1861](#)): *The labour time objectified in the product (or the quantity of labour contained in it) is greater than the labour time contained in the original capital, the capital advanced during the production process. This is only possible (assuming that the commodity is sold at its value) because the labour time objectified in the price of labour (the wage of labour) is less than the living labour time by which it is replaced in the production process. What appears as surplus value on the side of capital, appears as surplus labour on the side of the worker. Surplus value is nothing, but the excess labour provided by the worker over and above the quantity of objectified labour he has received in his own wage as the value of his labour capacity.*] Through the exploitation of their *labour power*, new capital accumulates in a system reliant on perpetual expansion, irrespective of the nature of the commodities produced [automobiles, software, internet connectivity, university lectures, or healthcare services managed within profit-driven structures]. Consequently, labour is subject to the volatile movements of capital [cycles of prosperity, recessions, prolonged expansions, and contractions, as well as the tumultuous periods of Great Crises], confronting the unstable trends and counter-trends inherent in this mode of production. Consequently, workers experience a perpetual and direct conflict in their daily lives with their employers and, more broadly, with the social mechanisms that perpetuate their exploitation: the State, with its normative constraints and associated ideological or repressive *apparatus*. Through daily struggles within production (focused on wages, working hours, and rhythms) and against these structures (governments and their policies), workers not only cultivate their consciousness and collective organization but may also endure periods of social setbacks, organizational breakdowns, and political backtracking. On the one hand, the consciousness of their inherent conflict with the ruling classes either solidifies or erodes through the continuous class struggle. Conversely, it's within this struggle that labour interests coalesce, giving rise to committees for resistance, councils, coordination of representatives, trade unions, and political parties. Hence, the genesis of mass opposition against the current social order originates within the working class, intrinsically at odds with the dominance of capital. Within the working class lies both the spirit and the revolutionary praxis, independent of the presence or entrenchment of a specific party, as historically exemplified [Russia 1905 or February 1917, Germany 1918, and various sudden uprisings in the history].

However, the working class is not homogeneous; it consists of various layers and fractions. Working class consciousness and organization develop differently across different sectors, considering factors such as the technical composition of work, professionalism, job roles, and educational qualifications. This development is also influenced by social divisions shaped or imposed by capital, such as those based on gender, age, ethnicity, citizenship, employment conditions, and work permits. For instance, some workers engage in production processes where capital organizes a collective dimension, as seen in factories or large companies.

Others are dispersed in smaller settings, maintaining a direct or individual relationship with their employer, such as in artisan workshops or small businesses. Some work independently, managing their own tools [reminiscent of the ancient [Verlagssystem](#), now reproduced in various forms of subcontracting, commissioned works, or among *riders* and freelancers]. Moreover, different production methods can shape various compositions within the same companies. For example, the assembly line simultaneously isolates and connects workers, while [Autonomous Production Units](#) organize them into teams and hierarchies. Some workers are involved in production processes marked by specific gender compositions, such as textiles and metallurgy, or ethnic-national compositions, as seen with many migrants in current industries in Italy like slaughterhouses, logistics, construction, or caregiving. This pattern is not new, as we saw in the sixties/seventies: workers in the northern factories often came from South Italy, bricklayers from Bergamo, and farmhands from the lower Veneto. Additionally, there are workers excluded from capital valorisation processes, such as public employees. While they could be subject to the [new public management](#) [a strategy to make public service *businesslike*] and they are subject to the broader class relations of the society (primarily regarding wages and hours), their work processes are not directly determined by an antagonistic relationship with capital. Instead, this relationship is mediated by the political framework, public spending, and welfare. Finally, not all the proletariat constitutes the working class, encompassing both employed and unemployed individuals. Certain social sectors exist outside the job market, such as in the Fordist family organization where women are socially framed in the roles of wives and mothers. There are also marginalized individuals who sustain themselves through informal, occasional, or illegal jobs, referred to as the so-called *Lumpenproletariat*. Additionally, contemporary society witnesses transitory conditions, with class sectors whose roots are still forming (e.g., students, socially subordinated adults) or are no longer operational (e.g., pensioners receiving deferred or social wages).

The capitalist society, in its essence, is not defined by a mere dialectic between two social classes, but rather by a triadic relationship: *any serious analysis of the political situation must take as its point of departure the mutual relations among the three classes: the bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie (including the peasantry) and the proletariat* [Trotsky, *The Only Road*, 1932]. In the contemporary world, there are various intermediate and middle classes within the interstices of capitalist production: *rentiers* (landowners, apartment proprietors, small concession holders), *direct producers* (craftsmen, farmers, little independent entrepreneurs, or those ensnared in supply chain dependencies), *self-reliant traders* (merchants and vendors), traditional and modern *professionals* (individuals who directly offer their proficiencies: notaries, lawyers, plumbers, IT specialists, actors, etc.). We can also encompass in these social sectors *corporate managers and executives* (often compensated through profit percentages, though not universally), *high-ranking state officials* (prefects, magistrates, public officials, and managerial personnel), and certain *highly specialized technicians* (effectively holding a quasi-professional monopoly in their respective domains). On the other hand, a significant portion of employees and technicians essentially comprises a skilled labor force, whether in the public or private sector. However, due to their aspirations for managerial and professional positions, they may occasionally identify as part of the middle classes. Hence, the intermediate classes are intricate and diverse, characterized by varying natures and configurations. For the most part, they are not remnants of bygone eras, and in numerous social formations, they do not merely persist as vestiges. Instead, they may encompass a substantial segment of the populace. In contrast to the enduring influence of peasants and artisans in historical capitalist societies, these contemporary intermediate classes exhibit limited economic autonomy, intimately entwined with the production processes. As Trotsky reminds us, in one of his writings on the development of fascism, *The rapid growth of German capitalism prior to the First World War by no means signified a simple destruction of the middle classes. Although it ruined some layers of the petty bourgeoisie it created others anew: around the factories, artisans and shopkeepers; within the factories, technicians and executives. But while preserving themselves and even growing numerically (the old and the new petty bourgeoisie compose a little less than one-half of the German nation) the middle classes*

have lost the last shadow of independence. They live on the periphery of large-scale industry and the banking system, and they live off the crumbs from the table of the monopolies and cartels, and off the spiritual alms of their theorists and professional politicians [Trotsky, What is National Socialism? 1932]. Consequently, these classes prove notably volatile, subject to the direct impact of the prevailing motion and ensuing restructurings. Such reconfigurations, indeed, occasionally unveil opportunities for quantitative expansion or the ascension of specific sectors. On other occasions, they set in motion processes of proletarianization, resulting in their ultimate dissolution. Their boundaries, therefore, remain fluid and at times indistinct: individuals in transition between varying conditions.

The capital organization, its movement, and the dynamics of class struggle have a profound impact on the configuration and organization of labor. This interplay among different productive organizations and diverse social compositions is not stagnant but undergoes continuous transformation in relation to the cyclical dynamics and underlying tendencies of capitalism. Booms, long waves, depressions, and Great Crises propel and mold processes of concentration or dispersion, the restructuring of supply chains, the redefinition of tasks and professions, migratory movements, and gender relations. Furthermore, the organization and class consciousness are contingent on the unequal and combined dynamics of the world market, with its hierarchies in the international division of labor evolving progressively over time. Thus, in recent decades, the relative decline of Western imperialisms and the burgeoning explosion of Chinese imperialism have shaped profound reorganizations in production and society, resulting in the disintegration of labor in the former and the emergence of a new working class in the Asian quadrant (young, concentrated, and recently migrated from rural areas). Within this framework, certain sectors of the proletariat assume hybrid configurations. For instance, the substantial urban expansion in recent decades, particularly in the peripheries and semi-peripheries of the world [from Lagos to Istanbul, from Karachi to São Paulo, from Cairo to Mumbai], is characterized by masses of uprooted peasants, whose social definition remains unsettled and fluid. Lastly, the victories and partial defeats that characterize periods of ascent, such as prolonged depressions, the structuring of social and political organizations, and the crystallization of social imaginaries and expectations, not only influence economic transformations but also mold collective identities. In contemporary society, the dominant social relationship is capitalist; but the proletariat is nonetheless fragmented and marked by a continuous process of composition and decomposition of different awareness regarding its antagonism with capital.

THE PARTY AND ITS ROLE IN SYSTEM TRANSITION

The party, the political vanguard organized around a program, plays a crucial role within this framework. Firstly, it contributes to the construction of a transitional vision. While the working class has its own spirit and revolutionary praxis, the vision and the project of transforming the mode of production require an organized political vanguard. In this context, it is vital to differentiate between the revolutionary process conceived as the overthrow of the ruling classes, and the revolutionary process conceived as the acquisition of power and its utilization to transform the capitalist mode of production. The working-class antagonism emerging within productive processes, aimed at countering the broader exploitation of humanity and nature perpetuated by the capitalist system, gives rise to conflicts and social resistances that can potentially lead to the overthrow of the ruling classes. As witnessed numerous times over the past two centuries, and more recently in various countries in the periphery and semi-periphery. However, the construction of a different society goes beyond merely seizing power; it requires a profound transformation of productive relations.

Indeed, within the anticapitalist camp, there are proponents who argue that a distinct mode of production has already matured within the trajectory of capitalist development. This lecture has focused on examining specific passages from Marx's works and providing interpretations of how production processes are transformed by the opposition of the working class. The new social relationship, they argue,

merely need to be emancipated from the prevailing relations of dominance [the so-called *command of capital*]. The class struggle propelled the automation of production. Automation, including the production of machines by machines, has transformed labor into a supervisory role and shifted the production of value towards widespread knowledge and social praxis (the *general intellect*). Consequently, social cooperation is seen as organizing increasingly outside the confines of enterprises and traditional working hours. The subordination to the ruling classes is then perceived as stemming from political oppression (or, more precisely, *biopolitical oppression*) rather than being inherently tied to the organization of production. This forms the basis of a composite radical and basically democratic political movement, that envisions the assertion of these new social relations through the disruption of the political hegemony of capital: the constituent movement of the multitude (see, for instance, Toni Negri's [Twenty Theses on Marx](#), 1996 or [Multitude](#), 2005). Nevertheless, there are also those who believe in the possibility of constructing extensive forms of mutualistic or community-based cooperation within the current social framework. Proponents of this view argue that within the gaps of capitalist development, they can construct alternative productive forms and progressively expand them to foster alternative social relations. They essentially embody a contemporary form of Proudhonism. Some integrate this perspective with the concept of [Temporary Autonomous Zones](#) (Hakim Bey, 1991), self-managed spaces capable of temporarily evading the structures and institutions imposed by social control. Lastly, another school of thought asserts that the political dimension of labor antagonism, when developed in a democratic framework compelled to consider the broader social interest, can reshape the dynamics of capital without necessarily dismantling it. This approach envisions the construction of hybrid societies, characterized by capitalism under public control. From this standpoint, the contemporary political dilemma lies in the creation of international state forms capable of harnessing the global and neoliberal dimensions of current capital. This overarching perspective often dominates present-day reformism, frequently manifested in the guise of *neo-Keynesian* theories, and regrettably serves as a reference for various centrist sectors.

The revolutionary communist movement, rooted in the theoretical contributions of Marx and Engels, considers the exercise of political power crucial for transforming productive processes and social relations. Marx, in his analysis of the emergence of capitalist society, precisely identified the decisive role that political power played in shaping these social dynamics. This is particularly evident in his examination of primitive accumulation [[Capital, Book I, part VIII](#)]. On one hand, the State influences the creation of a free proletariat through the expropriation of the agricultural population, their displacement from the land, and the regulation of the new workforce through draconian legislation against the expropriated (including policies targeting the poor and vagabonds) and laws aimed at suppressing wages [[Chapter 28](#): *Thus were the agricultural people, first forcibly expropriated from the soil, driven from their homes, turned into vagabonds, and then whipped, branded, tortured by laws grotesquely terrible, into the discipline necessary for the wage system*]. On the other hand, it is the State that facilitates the formation of the initial capital required to subjugate labor, constructing a commercial system involving the ruthless exploitation of other peoples and safeguarding the development of its own national industry [[Chapter 31](#): *The different momenta of primitive accumulation distribute themselves now, more or less in chronological order, particularly over Spain, Portugal, Holland, France, and England. In England at the end of the 17th century, they arrive at a systematical combination, embracing the colonies, the national debt, the modern mode of taxation, and the protectionist system. These methods depend in part on brute force, e.g., the colonial system. But, they all employ the power of the State, the concentrated and organised force of society, to hasten, hot-house fashion, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition. Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power*]. Marx rigorously analyzed capital and its contradictions but declined to theorize about the future socialist society; in other words, he was reluctant to provide *recipes for the cookshops of the future* ([Afterwords to the second edition of Capital](#)). Nevertheless, in various writings [[Manifesto](#), [Class Struggles in France](#) 1948-

1850, [letter to Weydemeyer](#) in 1852, [Critique of the Gotha Programme](#)], Marx and Engels clarify that the indispensable tool for reorganizing the relations of production is political power, the control of the violence and the economic utilization of this violence. This entails an anti-capitalist use of the State and its dictatorial powers, both to defend the revolution and to reorganize new social relations (expropriation of landed property, requisitioning of productive sites, nationalization of means of production and credit, etc.).

In the early 1900s, there was a more precise delineation of the approach and role of the party. Kautsky [in various articles in *Neue Zeit*, the primary newspaper of the SPD, 1901] and Lenin [[What Is to Be Done?](#), 1902] emphasized how this transitional project should necessarily organize itself around a program, gathering a political vanguard that shares it. Let's be clear. Within the communist and revolutionary movement, there were (and still are) sectors that believe the working class possesses not only an antagonistic force capable of overthrowing the ruling classes but also the ability to self-organize and develop a transitional process, managing the construction of a different mode of production directly through communal and council-like forms of self-government (i.e. *councilist* sectors, sometimes of an anarchist origin, often federalist, but not always). However, the elaborations of Kautsky and Lenin were conducted in a specific political confrontation against other and different tendencies within the labor movement. The growth of social democratic parties at the end of the nineteenth century had indeed begun to pose to the international socialist movement the problem of how to use that force in everyday politics. This occurred particularly in Germany (where a strong party, the SPD, had grown with its parliamentary representations and trade union organizations) and in France, where, despite diverse and not particularly structured workers' organizations, a significant parliamentary group of socialist orientation had been elected in 1898 within the framework of the anti-militarist wave unleashed by the *Dreyfus affair*. Meanwhile, in Russia, an imposing industrial concentration had developed, and the first major labor struggles had emerged: in these social conflicts, tendencies emerged that focused on the movement's tasks in defending immediate working-class interests (starting from wages and working conditions).

Germany and the Bernstein Debate. In the summer of 1894, under the leadership of [Georg Vollmar](#), the SPD group in the Bavarian Diet decided to vote in favor of the annual budget. This decision was made in relative silence, more or less unnoticed by the party as a whole, and particularly by its national leadership. However, a social-democratic journalist from Dresden wrote an article in *Neue Zeit* denouncing the Bavarian decision [*no single man and no single penny for the bourgeois government: supporting the budget is equivalent to supporting the prevailing political order*]. The article was signed [Parvus](#) (it was one of the first to use this pseudonym) and, in a way, sparked a discussion that dominated the following decade. The debate actually erupted in October 1897 when a series of articles were published by [Eduard Bernstein](#), one of the main and well-known leaders of the SPD along with [Kautsky](#), [Bebel](#), and [Liebknecht](#). Bernstein argued that the capitalist system was far from in crisis, pointing out that some of its developments were not foreseen by Marx. These included the spread of shareholding (contrary to the concentration of ownership), the emergence of new middle and intermediate classes (small businesses, technicians, professionals), and the ability of *Trust* policies to mitigate crises. Within the framework of universal male suffrage, a constantly looming reactionary threat, and persistent economic inequalities (low wages and job insecurity), Bernstein argued for a path of defending democracy and progressively socializing production through reforms that would gradually instill a different social system into capitalism [*the movement is everything, the final goal is nothing*]. As Bernstein and Vollmar subsequently clarified in [Petite Republique](#) [see next point], *if the principle of class struggle effectively compelled them to remain on the sidelines with arms folded and indifferent whenever the working class was not directly involved, socialism would never be the all-encompassing global movement to which the future belongs. Instead, it would be merely a limited and sterile sect, quickly marginalized from events. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that in the evolution of modern nations, there may be phases where partially seizing governmental power could be not only permissible but a fundamental duty for the socialist party* [our English translation. This is the theorization of participation in

interclassist governments. Bernstein and Vollmar's positions sparked extensive debate, initiated once again by Parvus with various articles between January and March 1898 [*Bernstein's Overthrow of Socialism*], and later continued by Luxemburg in [Social Reform or Revolution?](#) [1899]. Luxemburg revisited hypotheses about the feasibility of a revolutionary policy against capitalist policies and the reactionary risks, already put forward by Parvus in *Coup d'État and Mass Political Strike* [1895]. Reformist theses were rejected as opportunistic at the SPD's Stuttgart Congress (1898), although Bernstein was invited to further explore his ideas leading to the publication of *The Preconditions of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy* [1899]. The moderate wing of the SPD, particularly the trade union sector [which could rely on organizations with many more members than the party, solid financial resources, and an imposing apparatus managing cooperatives, newspapers, and mutualistic structures], saw in this strategy the possibility of focusing the party's politics on improving the conditions of workers without jeopardizing the structures and apparatuses gained within the framework of capitalist society. Thus, they increasingly supported this approach, vehemently criticizing the left (and foreign) wing of Parvus and Luxemburg in the SPD's Lübeck Congress (1901). In any case, Kautsky forcefully intervened against the reformist approach right after that congress, with the essay *Reform and Social Revolution* (1902). In this contribution, he emphasized that capitalist development had bolstered the power of the state and the *command* of the ruling classes, challenging the notion of a progressive expansion of democracy. He argued that financial capitalism increased its role, countering any hypothesis of socialization through antidemocratic policies and imperialistic endeavors. Furthermore, he underscored how recent economic transformations enlarged the working class, thereby intensifying social conflict, now manifested through mass strikes, even with political significance.

France and Practical Reformism. In 1894, [Alfred Dreyfus](#), a Jewish artillery officer from Alsace, faced accusations of espionage and received a sentence to Devil's Island in French Guiana. *The Dreyfus Affair: A Judicial Error* was published in 1896, and on January 13, 1898, Emile Zola released his powerful *J'Accuse*. The following day saw the emergence of the *Petition of Intellectuals*, signed by half of the professors at the Sorbonne, including *Renard, Gide, Anatole France*, and the young *Proust*. This affair marked a clear political divide between democrats and reactionaries. The May 1898 elections witnessed a favorable outcome for the former and a consolidation of the *socialist group*, boasting over sixty deputies out of 586. In the previous elections, there had already been a significant breakthrough with more than 40 deputies. The socialist movement, however, was divided among various factions, including the [French Workers' Party](#) of [Lafargue](#) and [Guesde](#) (Marxist-oriented), the [Socialist Revolutionary Party](#) of [Vaillant](#) (Blanquist, a Commune Council member), the [Revolutionary Socialist Workers' Party](#) of [Allemane](#) (another Commune participant, a split from the [Federation of Socialist Workers](#) of [Brousse](#)), and especially the so-called *Independents* led by [Millerand](#) and [Viviani](#), including [Briand](#) [all of them later held significant government positions during World War I]. These factions, despite their differences, forged a *unity of action*, as proclaimed by Millerand at the *Congress of Socialist municipalities* in St. Mandé on May 30, 1896: *this political movement aimed at the necessary and progressive replacement of capitalist ownership: this outcome can be pursued through the essential and sufficient means of universal suffrage, serving as a tool for acquiring public power and fostering international agreement among workers* [our translation in English]. This perspective went largely unnoticed at the time, and it was essentially theorized by Bernstein at a later stage. Divisions surfaced with the unfolding of the [Dreyfus affair](#) between 1898 and 1899, marked by monarchist conspiracies, military pronouncements, and a fierce struggle for the presidency of the Republic. It was eventually won by Loubet, a Dreyfusard. The *French Workers' Party* (POF) warned of the risk of subordination to bourgeois policies and withdrew support for the Dreyfusard camp in July '98. However, the fracture occurred later. On June 3, 1899, the *Court of Cassation* decided to retry the case, and the following day, Loubet was attacked in Auteuil by nationalist protester. Faced with opposing demonstrations, the government resigned. In that context, marked by fears of reactionary coups, the president entrusted Waldeck-Rousseau, a Dreyfusard and republican senator, with the task of forming a coalition government. Millerand agreed to participate on a personal basis, despite the

presence of a general who had led the suppression of the Commune. The POF denounced this choice, and the parliamentary group split. The scandal was triggered more by the presence of that general and Millerand's individual decision than by his strategic approach. It is worth noting that in November 1895, almost all socialist deputies, including *Guesdists*, had already voted in favor of the radical government of Leon Bourgeois, although the episode had gone unnoticed in France and Europe. In any case, the debate within French socialism led to a broad international discussion promoted by [Petit République](#) (the newspaper of the *Independents*) on two questions: *can socialist forces intervene in conflicts between bourgeois parties to save political freedom? To what extent can the socialist proletariat participate in bourgeois power?* Participants included Germans *Bebel, Kautsky, Liebknecht, Schohlank, Bernestein, and Vollmar*; English *Hardie, Mann, Hyndman, and Quelch*; Italians *Ferri and Labriola*; Belgians *Bertrand and Vandervelde*; and Russian *Plechanov*. The *Independent Socialists* voted multiple times in favor of the government in the following years, amid controversies and heated discussions. [Jean Jaurès](#) strongly supported the ministerial choice, while the POF, Blanquists, and anarchists led the intransigent front. In 1900, the congress of the Second International was held in Paris, dominated by discussions on the ninth item on the agenda (*seizure of public power and alliances with bourgeois parties*). On that occasion, a unitarist motion drafted by Kautsky was adopted, asserting that the *class struggle did not permit any alliance with any fraction of the capitalist class* but admitting that coalitions might become necessary in *exceptional situations, to be evaluated at the national level, with the party's consent and resignations when the government shows clear bias in the capitalist/labor conflict*. While contesting the possibility of a gradual seizure of power, the motion effectively opened the door to government participation. In fact, it was notably supported by Bernstein, Vollmar, and Jaurès, seeing it as the starting point for a far-reaching reformist action. Vaillant publicly questioned how Kautsky, who had fought against Bernstein in Germany, could capitulate to similar ideas. The motion, in fact, was an attempt to prevent a split, particularly within the SPD, and highlighted both the German leader's particular concern for the unity of the socialist movement and his future political evolutions. However, immediately after the congress Kautsky himself presented a more intransigent interpretation in *Neue Zeit*: *alliances between socialist and liberal forces, he clarified, are signs of the strength of the reaction and are only possible for defensive purposes, ruling out any possibility of using them for reforms or that workers' parties become promoters of broad popular coalitions*. Notably, the article triggered a strong response from Vollmar and a subsequent reply from Luxemburg. This debate, effectively, marking a clear shift in the SPD's attitude towards Millerand and it determined his progressive isolation. In any case, the Paris resolution did not remain without consequences. In 1901, for example, the *Italian Socialist Party* voted confidence in the [Zanardelli-Giolitti government](#) (although, it should be noted, in 1912, [Bissolati](#), [Bonomi](#), and [Cabrini](#) were expelled for choosing to participate in consultations for a new government: they founded the [Italian Reformist Socialist Party](#) and joined the wartime executive in 1916, like the French *Independents*). The Sixth Congress of the Second International, held in Amsterdam in 1904, explicitly rejected Bernstein's reformist strategies and Jaurès' Republican defense tactics, effectively adopting the same resolution that the SPD had approved the previous year at its Dresden Congress. It's worth noting that Jaurès himself, in a 1903 article in the Italian *Critica Sociale*, outlined with considerable precision the Kautsky's and SPD's trajectory: *when German socialism, despite the pedantic narrowness of some of its doctrinaires, will have assumed the task of a great party of democracy, in the same interest of the proletariat and social revolution, Kautsky will certainly find some arbitrary combination of abstract concepts to reconcile Marx's principles with the new life, adamant in remaining the official theorist of an evolution he could not prevent* [our translation in English].

Russia and Economicism. At that time, Russia was in a markedly different condition. It was an autocratic dictatorship that outlawed all political organizations, including liberal and conservative ones. Russia was a predominantly rural social formation, but it had seen the emergence of significant industrial concentrations and advanced production processes, within the framework of global market development triggered by the great depression of 1873/95 [the *first wave of globalization* that would culminate with World War I]. Lenin

analyzed this situation in one of his early works (*The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, 1899). Parvus delved even deeper in the subsequent years, producing a series of essays and articles published in *Neue Zeit* and later in *Iskra* [*The World Market and the Agricultural Crisis*, 1899; *The starving Russia*, 1900; *Russia and Revolution*, 1906]. He focused on the world market and the push to build extensive economic blocs, the prospect of an upcoming confrontation between the USA and Russia amidst a divided Europe, the Russian contradictions between famine and capitalist development, the consequences of the Russo-Japanese War, and the likelihood of a revolution in the country. In this context, the 1890s saw the emergence of the first major working-class struggles in Russia: in 1893, a massive strike in Ryazan, a hundred kilometers from Moscow; in 1894, in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Minsk, Vilnius, and Tbilisi; in 1895, the Putilov factories, followed first by the footwear and tobacco industries in the capital and then by realities across the country; in 1896, strikes shook St. Petersburg, with mass demonstrations, and recurred in Rostov in 1902 and in southern Russia in 1903. During those years, various groups were consolidating into the *Russian Social Democratic Labour Party* [RSDLP], with its first congress in Minsk in 1898 and second in Brussels/London in 1903. Some of these circuits established close ties with the mass movements, particularly those associated with two newspapers: *Rabočaja Mysl'* [*Worker's Thought*] and *Rabočee Delo* [*Worker's Cause*]. *The struggle for an economic position, the fight against capital based on everyday essential interests, and strikes as a means of this struggle: this was the slogan of the labor movement; a fight that is understandable to all, strengthens forces, and unites workers.* The profile and program of these circuits involved advancing the economic demands of workers within the framework of their conflicts in the production processes. Any hypothesis of political engagement was rejected, whether immediate opposition to the dictatorship or prospective efforts to change the mode of production. Initiative, instead, had to remain closely linked to wage increases, reduced working hours, the development of unions, mutual aid funds, and recreational centers. The underlying idea was that workers had to self-organize, building their own structures because the emancipation of workers is the task of the workers themselves. In this context, *Rabočee Delo* developed a programmatic gradualism essentially coinciding with French practical reformism and Bernstein's theoretical reformism, albeit in a completely different context. In the formation of the RSDLP Lenin, therefore, shifted from polemics against *Populist* groups [particularly *Narodnaya Volya*, the People's Will, which aimed to overthrow the regime through extensive terrorist actions, thus interrupting the state-led capitalist development and fostering a different mode of production centered on the *Obshchina*, the Russian peasant commune] to polemics against these new *economicist* sectors [which, in contrast, rejected any political demands, the goal of seizing power, and therefore any socialist political project].

Kautsky and Lenin, in the early 1900s, thus emphasized the necessity of organizing a vanguard party in the framework of these polemics. The role of the party, structured around a program, was clarified in contrast to the emerging tendency within other segments of the labor movement that concentrated on defending and enhancing working conditions, prioritizing the movement rather than the ultimate objective. Both Kautsky and Lenin underscored the distinction between the class's antagonism [*the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation...*] and the *transitional* political project [*socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without and not something that arose within it spontaneously... the task of Social-Democracy is to imbue the proletariat (literally: saturate the proletariat) with the consciousness of its position and the consciousness of its task*]. This stood in opposition to those who argued that this transition would occur *more or less* spontaneously, essentially confining their efforts within the boundaries of a reformist approach, defending working class interests within capitalist society.

In *What Is to Be Done?*, Lenin tended to bend the stick, as often happens. That is, he radicalized his arguments to better confront the object of his critique. Specifically, he did so by excessively highlighting the

role of intellectuals and ultimately, the party: essentially, *an external consciousness to the class*. He acknowledged this [as early as 1903](#) [*We all know that the economists bent the stick in one direction. In order to straighten the stick, it was necessary to bend it in the other direction, and that is what I did*]. He reiterated these positions against the so-called *committee men* in 1904/05, against those who sought to exclude workers from party committees, in the name of the alleged lack of political consciousness. And Lenin did it even more [distinctly in 1908](#): *the working class, whose best representatives built the Social-Democratic Party, for objective economic reasons possesses a greater capacity for organization than any other class in capitalist society. Without this condition an organization of professional revolutionaries would be nothing more than a plaything, an adventure, a mere signboard*. What Is To Be Done? repeatedly emphasizes this, pointing out that the organization it advocates has no meaning apart from its connection with the genuine revolutionary class that is spontaneously rising to struggle.

In Kautsky's and Lenin's perspective, the political project of the party is actively engaged in the daily struggles of the working class, countering the reformist tendencies that emerge within its ranks. Both are aware that these inclinations may have a solid social basis of their own. They could arise not solely from the subjective inclinations of certain individuals or from the mere projection of subjective interests tied to political and trade union structures established within the framework of capitalist society. These inclinations, in some way, also find their roots in the very stratification of the working class. The role of the party, therefore, extends beyond merely bridging partial resistances with the revolutionary outlook, as Trotsky will later expound on the transitional program. It encompasses actively supporting the reconfiguration of various factions within the working class while confronting the inevitable emergence of reformist tendencies within its midst. These reformist tendencies tend to manifest prominently in specific phases of the economic cycle, correlating with improvements in wages that align with the ascension of profits, facilitated by enhanced productivity and, consequently, *relative* exploitation [that is, the extraction of greater *relative surplus value* through competition, technological innovation, and the intensification of work rhythms]. Such trends are particularly discernible in capitalist metropolises, intertwined with unequal exchange dynamics and the potential for improved living conditions through the subordination of other territories. Nevertheless, these processes can also be discerned in more general dynamics, rooted in the working class's integral participation in the production process. In fact, labor is a constituent part of capital, functioning as *living capital*: within the relations of production, workers not only discover an opportunity to cultivate antagonism against managerial authorities and employers, but also encounter a compelling impetus to identify with the production processes in which they play an active role. This dynamic becomes especially pronounced when specific technical or social compositions tend to foster distinct professional or corporate identities.

This view essentially encapsulates the concept of the *labor aristocracy*, to which Lenin alluded as the genesis of revisionism within the workers' movement, culminating in a rupture with the Second International during the onset of World War I. Lenin drew inspiration from Engels' introduction in 1885 to [The Condition of the Working Class in England](#), although the concept had been a recurrent theme in the late 19th-century English discourse. Great Britain's industrial hegemony resulted in multifaceted stratifications within the working class based on occupations, industrial sectors, gender, and nationalities. For instance, the skilled workforce, comprising workers and artisans, was predominantly male, while women were concentrated in textiles and ceramics with significantly lower remuneration. Additionally, the influx of labor from Ireland, designated by English capital for agricultural production (particularly large *potato* monoculture) exerted a notable influence on these class dynamics. The *Great Famine* of the 1840s precipitated a wave of socially stigmatized migrants to England, willing to toil for reduced wages. Marx himself, in his [Letter to Meyer and Vogt](#) (1870), underscored how the revolution in England could potentially be expedited by Irish independence. In other words, the liberation of Ireland, by mitigating the ethnic stratification of the proletariat in England, could potentially radicalize class conflict in the imperialist metropolis. The more skilled, male, and English segments effectively organized in Trade Unions, commenced pursuing policies of

alliance with employers (as in the so-called [Birmingham Alliances](#)), and constituted the mass base propelling the reformist policies of the *Webb couple* [[Beatrice](#) and [Sidney](#)]. Engels posited that this stratification had been facilitated by Britain's global monopoly and would eventually be assimilated over time. However, Lenin recognized that imperialist development structured and generalized the hierarchies of the world market, impeding the absorption anticipated by Engels. As [Hobswbam noted](#) (2012), in fact, although these phenomena affect a minority, they can exert a considerable impact on the organized workers' movement.

In the post-World War II era, the United States and Europe experienced an extended expansion known as *Les Trente Glorieuses*. This dynamic was long denied by both Stalinism and its left-wing critics, including most revolutionary communists, who considered an expansive wave improbable after the outbreak of the crisis in the late stage of capitalism. Various theories emerged in the postwar years regarding the definitive integration of the central Western working class into the *petit-bourgeoisie*, based on considerations about the proliferation of a working-class aristocracy leading to ongoing wage improvements in the imperialist metropolises. A text inevitably referenced in this context is Herbert Marcuse's [One-Dimensional Man](#) [1964] which emphasized how advanced industrial society had effectively framed workers through widespread prosperity, false needs, and an individualistic culture perpetuated by mass media and advertising. It is crucial to underline that, despite providing the foundational rationale and a mass base for reformist or conciliatory tendencies within the labor movement, the articulations of labor do not structure truly *aristocracies*, meaning *stable and relatively autonomous social sector*. These workers, more often men than women, do experience exploitation in the capital valorization processes. This condition indeed leads to conflicts with employers, not only regarding wages, working hours, and production pace but also concerning their own bodies. For example, chemists, often considered an archetype of the labor aristocracy, have firsthand experience of capital's conscious neglect of health and safety. Their contractual conditions, anyway, are transitional within the ongoing upheavals of capital, with its expansions and creative destructions. Wage, social, and working condition gains are often questioned during transitional periods in the cycle or during seasons of Great Crisis, within the unequal and combined redefinitions of the world market. The strong organization and class consciousness of these sectors can trigger highly radical struggles during times of crisis, potentially leading to outright revolutionary processes [*Putilov Works* in 1917, *Ford plants* in the 1930s in the USA, the *petrochemical plant* in Marghera, *FIAT Mirafiori*, *Pirelli* or other Italian factories in extended '69 movement].

WORKING CLASS AND PARTY.

Class organization and subjective tendencies in the party. The praxis and theories of the past two centuries inform us that the working class's ability to defend its collective interests, organize itself, and cultivate a social identity is a pivotal element in any anticapitalistic social opposition. However, drawing lessons from the Soviet experience, they also emphasize that this ability is an indispensable tool to counteract the subjective inclination of organized vanguards to substitute themselves for the working class. This inclination persists both before and after the seizure of power, albeit with varying dynamics and outcomes. In the context of the anticapitalistic struggle, it leads to the development of vanguardist deviations, involving interventions that extend *far* beyond the scope of mass consciousness, driven by the belief and illusion of dragging the masses into the revolutionary process [behind and, in some manner, onto the shoulders of the party]. This political dynamic often coincides with organizational fetishes, leaderisms, and disciplinary centralizations. This drift leads the organized vanguard to isolate itself from mass movements, occasionally fracturing along unessential and personalistic fault lines, rendering it incapable of propelling revolutionary processes when the opportunity arises. Conversely, in the leadership of the revolutionary state, this tendency leads to the development of bureaucratic and authoritarian degenerations, fueled by the shortcomings of the productive forces and the challenges of the revolutionary process, resulting in isolations.

This dynamic is sustained by a party dictatorship in which the ruling caste employs coercive organs, even against labor, to constrain its consciousness and disorganize its structures. The difference between these two subjective deviations (pre and post-seizure of power) is *substantial*: in one case, the party lacks the ability to connect with the class struggle, while in the other, it transforms into a counter-revolutionary force suppressing the class. In either scenario, a *Bonapartist* conception asserts itself within the party, positioning it above the class in the illusion of teleologically determining its development, in alignment with ultimate goals. By claiming political autonomy, one disengages from the representation of the class. These tendencies have left an indelible mark on the history of the communist movement, with the tragic Stalinist degenerations. Unfortunately, they have also influenced the frequent sectarianisms and regressions of revolutionary communist parties before the seizure of power, as evident, for instance, in the deviations of parties and international factions in the Trotskyist historical experience.

If the party is indeed an indispensable instrument in the revolutionary process, it is crucial to balance its role through self-organization and working-class democracy. This dialectical and contradictory relationship is never defined or stable, as evidenced by the evident and repeated development of reformist and vanguard tendencies. It continually reproduces itself in history through the contrast between different lines and approaches within both the labor and communist movements. The importance of contrasting and balancing these diverse tendencies also holds significant implications for the conception and organization of the party itself, as we emphasized in various contributions [see *Centralism and Democracy in the Party Building Process: A Heritage to Preserve and Revitalize*, an alternative document on tendencies and factions at the October 2020 Central Committee).

This dialectic between working class and party, in a sense, has been present since the inception of the communist movement. The problems of political independence of the working class, the role of the party, and the self-organization of the proletariat are already articulated in some writings of Marx and Engels, at least in essence. They deeply reflected on these issues, particularly after the experiences of 1848/49 in Germany, the alliance with the bourgeoisie, and the unsuccessful of that approach. [The Address to the Central Committee of the Communist League](#) in 1850 clearly emphasizes the need to develop an independent and centralized organization of workers, autonomous from the bourgeoisie, capable of defending the interests and political perspective of the proletariat. In that very text, twenty years before the Paris Commune, Marx and Engels also introduce the theme of dual power through the mass dimension of *councils*: *Alongside the new official governments they must simultaneously establish their own revolutionary workers' governments, either in the form of local executive committees and councils or through workers' clubs or committees, so that the bourgeois-democratic governments not only immediately lost the support of the workers but find themselves from the very beginning supervised and threatened by authorities behind which stand the whole mass of the workers.* Certainly, Marx and Engels wrote with no awareness of subsequent developments: the emergence of reformist tendencies in the labor movement, vanguardist deviations, and Stalinist degenerations. Nevertheless, it's striking how their reasoning establishes a parallel between the independence of the class party and the role of councils as mass entities and counterpower (governance of the class, not merely structures for union defense or revolutionary action).

Indeed, the full development of this relationship between working-class and party emerged in the course of the two Russian revolutions (1905 and 1917), integrating and actually modifying the original Bolshevik approach through the establishment of self-organized governing structures by the working class (counterpower): the *Soviets*. However, this approach later confirmed its value (in a negative sense) with the gradual bureaucratic drift, first during the Thermidor period and then in the Stalinist degeneration. It may, therefore, be useful to summarize the dynamics and events surrounding the emergence of the soviets and their relationship with the party between 1905 and 1917.

COUNCILS AND THE REVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

The relationship between the working class and the party is therefore contradictory and dialectical: it doesn't originate on a theoretical plane but emerges in the practice of the revolutionary process. Despite a fleeting mention in the *1850 Address*, the experience of councils had not substantially emerged, neither practically nor theoretically, until 1905. The Paris Commune of 1871 had developed initially around the *committees of the National Guard* (and its Central Committee), and later around the election of its council through universal suffrage. The development of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), the primary organization of the labor movement, had occurred through elections, political campaigns, and the growth of unions, newspapers, and affiliated organizations. The experience of councils in Russia, in a sense, arose precisely from the absence of these structures.

The Birth of Councils. So where do the Soviets originate? They arise from working class struggle within the relations of production. In the early strikes in Russia in the 1880s and 1890s, facing spontaneous and disorganized protests, it was often the same corporate management that encouraged workers to appoint their representatives to initiate negotiations and resume production. This primordial trade union dynamic, for instance, is widespread in the contemporary Chinese labor movement. During that period in Russia, an informal, fluid and occasional network of delegates developed, consolidating practices and habits in Russian factories. These councils, being spontaneous and temporary structures, took different forms and names depending on the times and situations (as emphasized by *Anweiler, 1974*): strike committees [*stacechnyj komitet*], workers' commissions [*komissija rabocich*], authorized representatives [*upolnomocennye*], councils of authorized representatives [*soviet upolnomocennyh*], assembly of delegates or deputies [*delegatskoe, deputatskoe sobranie*], elected commissions [*komissija vybornych*], councils of delegates [*soviet starost*, literally council of elders, in the sense of representative figures]. This dynamic was also facilitated by the strong familiarity that Russian workers maintained with the practices and customs of village assemblies [*Mir* in the *Obshchina*], often being recent immigrants and, in a sense, *quasi-peasants*: they in fact maintained residences, ties, and a tendency to return to their villages during difficult times [*the resemblance to the class composition of contemporary Chinese [mingong](#) is evident here*].

The movements are sudden but not truly spontaneous. As we have repeatedly emphasized in the Italian *Workers Communist Party* debate, the large mobilizations involving the masses are not unforeseeable because they develop from conflicts, subjectivities, relationships, networks, identities, and imaginaries that crystallize over time. The explosion of the 1905 revolution did not solely arise from the evident social tensions accumulating in the country and the defeat in the Russo-Japanese War [as indeed predicted by *Parvus* between the summer and fall of 1904], but it intersected with a working-class fabric that had already developed significant strikes. It's not coincidental that [Zubatov](#) (a czarist police official) spurred the creation of reactionary workers' associations during those years, hoping to release the pressure of social struggles while simultaneously controlling them. It was an attempt to avoid any political transgression, somewhat in parallel with the economic tendencies present in the movement. However, these associations helped consolidate, generalize, and structure the network of delegates, subjectivities, relationships, and imaginaries on which the mass workers' movement later developed. An example was the *Assembly of Russian Factory and Workshop Workers*, led by the famous [priest Gapon](#), which initiated the revolution on January 9, 1905, with a protest march against the dismissal of four Putilov workers [[Bloody Sunday](#)]. This association in St. Petersburg had 7,000-8,000 members [with at least 700 at Putilov], and during the strike that began on January 3, a delegation of 37 delegates was promptly elected. This dynamic was not confined to St. Petersburg; in Moscow and Kharkov, for instance, in the following spring (marked by strikes that forced the Tsar to abandon repression), committees and councils with a trade union profile developed, particularly among printers, textiles, and metallurgists. The most significant was the Moscow printers' council, which included 264 delegates from 110 companies, with a 15-member executive. With the growth of the mass

movement, the need for coordination of initiatives increased; during those months, however, there was no clear distinction between coordination, strike committees, sectoral representations, and delegates' councils.

The first true soviet emerged in mid-May in Ivanovo-Voznesensk, near Moscow, then possibly the most crucial textile district in Russia. It originated from an economic mobilization (abolition of night work and overtime, monthly minimum wage) with a strike that involved over 40,000 workers in a few days. In response to this struggle, an unusual advisor suggested the election of a council to initiate negotiations: a government inspector! On May 15, a council of factory representatives was elected [*Ivanovo-Voznesenskii Soviet Upolnomocennykh*], comprising about a hundred delegates, mostly from textiles but also including engravers and mechanics. The Council aimed to lead the strike, conduct negotiations, and maintain order in the squares. The intensification of the confrontation led, on the one hand, to the evolution of the platform (universal suffrage, pensions, labor rights), and on the other, it expanded its tasks, also to contain repression (on June 3, the army intervened with bloody clashes). By the end of July, the movement was defeated, and the Council was dissolved. Nevertheless, the impact was significant throughout Russia. In nearby *Kostroma*, a strike involving over 10,000 workers began in July, led by a council of 108 delegates who, in turn, formed an executive committee of 12 members. This committee collaborated directly with the Social Democratic Party [some representatives were seated on the Council] and published its bulletin [*Izvestija*]: a model that then imposed itself in many other contexts.

The czarist regime was cornered during the summer due to the disastrous course of the war and mobilizations. On August 6, the Czar was compelled to establish a Duma, and on the 23rd, he signed a peace treaty with Japan. However, these events did not bring stabilization but rather a second wave of strikes. It began with the printers and typesetters in Moscow, followed by those in St. Petersburg, and then the railways (strike committees emerged at all stations). By mid-October, it spread to the factories and became widespread. It was a political strike demanding amnesty, universal suffrage, and the convening of a constituent assembly. Under this pressure, the Czar was forced, through a new manifesto, to guarantee civil rights, a parliamentary role for the Duma, and elections with expanded suffrage.

In this context, the Council of Workers' Deputies was formed in St. Petersburg. The proposal was initially put forward by the city's *Menshevik* organization to coordinate the ongoing strike. Delegates, referred to as *storosti*, were elected at a rate of one for every 500 workers. This procedure had already been used in February when Senator Shidlovsky led a government commission to investigate worker discontent, incorporating some representatives elected in the city based on nine divisions by industry type. As highlighted by Anweiler (1974), the St. Petersburg Soviet thus emerged from *various paths*: the widespread practice of electing committees in factories in struggle, the forms of representation prompted by the adversaries themselves (company management and government officials), *Menshevik* propaganda advocating for a workers' congress, the example of the council of printers and typesetters in Moscow, and the experiences of Ivanovo and Kostroma. At the first meeting, only 40 delegates participated, with a mixed composition (some were representatives of the Shidlovsky Commission, some were factory delegates, and only 15 had been specifically elected for this Council). In any case, elections generally took place in assembly by a show of hands, under precarious and sometimes confusing conditions, essentially operating as a nominal and majority-based mechanism.

The Soviets experienced rapid growth, initially in size: approximately 90 delegates attended the second meeting, and over 200 attended the third, representing about a hundred factories and five unions. Political organizations were admitted to the Council, specifically the *Mensheviks*, *Bolsheviks*, and *Socialist Revolutionaries* (i.e., the three socialist parties). This decision sparked debate: some unaffiliated delegates argued against party polemics within the Council, emphasizing that the assembly should solely focus on labor issues. Ultimately, it was decided to include the three political organizations from the labor movement. This decision aimed to establish the new body with the necessary authority in the eyes of the masses, recognizing

its role as a general representative. To ensure this, each of the three socialist parties was given equal representation in the Executive Committee (three representatives each), allowing participation and intervention without voting power. During the third meeting, the new organization officially named itself the *Council of Workers' Deputies* [*Sovetrabocich deputatov*], forming an Executive Committee with 22 members (2 for each of the 7 city districts, 2 for each of the major unions, and 9 non-voting representatives from political organizations). The *Executive Committee* continued to grow, reaching 35 members and 15 non-voting members by November. Furthermore, the Soviet evolved beyond being a mere strike committee, increasingly becoming a general political representative body. As highlighted by [Trotsky \(1905\)](#), it *came into being as a response to an objective need, a need born of the course of events. It was an organization which was authoritative and yet had no traditions; which could immediately involve a scattered mass of hundreds of thousands of people while having virtually no organizational machinery; which united the revolutionary currents within the proletariat; which was capable of initiative and spontaneous self control – and most important of all, which could be brought out from underground within twenty-four hours.* Workers' councils formed in various locations (over fifty were identified throughout the year), driven by the general strike, exhibiting fluid configurations between strike committees and revolutionary organs of the working class. Among the most notable was the Moscow Council, established in November as the *City Strike Committee*, with 180 delegates representing approximately 80,000 workers.

The intensification of the conflict with Tsarism. Between late October and November, the St. Petersburg Soviet called for an eight-hour strike. The initiative ultimately ended in substantial failure due to the employers' lockout and over 19,000 dismissals. On November 12, in a dramatic session, the Soviet concluded the dispute, allowing each factory the freedom to decide whether to resume work: this was *effectively a disbandment*. Nevertheless, the St. Petersburg Soviet pursued its political intervention, issuing a *manifesto* that essentially echoed the main demands of the *Russian Social Democratic Labour Party*: an elected assembly for a democratic republic, seen as a prerequisite for continuing the struggle for socialism. The 1905 Councils, fundamentally, viewed themselves as united front structures of the working class, rather than as the nucleus of workers' power or a new revolutionary authority. Simultaneously, however, in the confrontation with the government, they assumed the role of a counter-power, issuing directives on freedom of the press to printing houses, post offices, and railways, and negotiating with the municipal Duma, the militia, and the government. At the end of November, repression brought the experience to the end, marked by the arrest of its main leaders of St. Petersburg Soviet (beginning with its three presidents: Chrystalëv-Nosar, Trotsky, and Parvus). In Moscow, on the other hand, the Soviet promoted an insurrection that unfolded in clashes neighborhood by neighborhood.

On the 1905 Soviets, different perspectives were indeed debated, especially regarding the role of these organisms. Let's examine the main ones.

The Mensheviks. The initial proposal of the Councils, as we have seen, originated from the Menshevik organization in St. Petersburg. The *Menshevik* political stance essentially advocated for a democratic revolution, supporting liberal initiatives and their prospective government from a leftist position. This perspective was embodied in the endorsement of the *banquets campaign* in the autumn of 1904, a series of political dinners advocating for the constituent assembly organized by the liberal *Union of Liberation*. It followed the model of the *Campagne des banquets* that contributed to the downfall of the French monarchy in 1848. The Mensheviks, in fact, thought that, given Russia's political and social backwardness, only through bourgeois democracy could class struggle unfold, faithfully reproducing the pattern of social and political development in major capitalist countries. In any case, they did not adopt a *reformist* or *collaborationist* approach, similar to Bernstein or Jaurès: they insisted that the party must stay outside the government, to avoid complicity with anti-worker policies and any potential anti-entrepreneurial choices that could push the bourgeoisie toward reaction. The party, therefore, should support the democratic revolution and the

development of capitalism, maintain a consistent political and social opposition to the liberal government, and consequently, foster the maturation of revolutionary conditions (both objective and subjective). The councils were essentially conceived as a tool for this policy: broad, united, and informal structures capable of giving an active and mass dimension to this working-class support for democratic and revolutionary policies. From this perspective, the *Menshevik* approach saw the Councils as an initial gathering from which the political organization of the working class could emerge. At the Congress of the RSDLP in 1903, the well-known split with the Bolsheviks occurred just over the fluidity of the party's organizational forms: the Mensheviks envisioned the Councils as a primordial mass organism that would eventually become unnecessary with the development of a workers' party, following the SPD model. This proposal was also supported to counter the Bolshevik slogan of the provisional workers' and peasants' government (see below), giving the workers' initiative a different and parallel dimension to that of the government. In fact, the government's issue was intentionally left entirely in the hands of liberal initiatives. However, this policy presented contradictory aspects. The very class self-organization created autonomous structures that paved the way on the one hand for independent proletarian action and, on the other hand, for a power that stood independently from the government. Unintentionally, this perspective actually traced the vague outline provided by Marx and Engels in the *Address of the Communist League in 1850*. This was acknowledged by [Aleksandr Martynov](#), one of the main Menshevik representatives. He underscored that the coexistence of two proletarian organizations—the party and the Soviet—was an abnormal, provisional, and temporary phenomenon that sooner or later would have to disappear.

The Bolsheviks. Lenin's proposition was precisely for a *provisional revolutionary government*: a coalition of socialist parties, open to other radical forces, a manifestation of a democratic dictatorship of the working class and peasantry. In other words, he believed that in Russia, a liberal, democratic, and progressive government was impossible due to the structural weakness of liberal forces and the emergence of an organized proletariat. The combative working class, with its social demands, compelled bourgeois forces to align with the reactionary camp. So, for Lenin the only possible solution was a government of the subordinate classes, working-class and peasants, with a *democratic program primarily focused on agrarian reform*. As Lenin [emphasized in 1905](#): *What is Martynov's muddle-headedness due to? To the fact that he confounds democratic revolution with socialist revolution; that he overlooks the role of the intermediate stratum of the people lying between the "bourgeoisie" and the "proletariat" (the petty-bourgeois masses of the urban and rural poor, the "semi-proletarians", the semi-proprietors); and that he fails to understand the true meaning of our minimum programme. Indeed, let us but consider all the economic and political transformations formulated in that programme (the demand for the republic, for arming the people, for the separation of the Church from the State, for full democratic liberties, and for decisive economic reforms). Is it not clear that these transformations cannot possibly be brought about in a bourgeois society without the revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the lower classes? Is it not clear that it is not the proletariat alone, as distinct from the "bourgeoisie", that is referred to here, but the "lower classes", which are the active motive force of every democratic revolution? These classes are the proletariat plus the scores of millions of urban and rural poor whose conditions of existence are petty-bourgeois. Without a doubt, very many representatives of these masses belong to the bourgeoisie. But there is still less doubt that the complete establishment of democracy is in the interests of these masses, and that the more enlightened these masses are, the more inevitable will be their struggle for the complete establishment of democracy.* At the Third Congress of the RSDLP (April/May 1905, London), the sole instrument for this policy was the party: an animating force in resistance against reaction, a direct agent of initiative in the constituent assembly and the provisional government. The only working-class structures considered were the revolutionary committees of factories, neighborhoods, and villages: vanguard bodies meant to organize strikes, root the party, and prepare for insurrection. I.e., these structures had a mass projection, yes, but not organizing the masses. The focus of the initiative was, in fact, concentrated on the insurrection: *In the revolution it is first of all*

important to win-even if only in a single city-and to establish a provisional revolutionary government, so that this government, acting as an instrument of the insurrection and as recognized leader of the revolutionary people, can undertake to organize revolutionary self-government. ... Organization of revolutionary self-government and election of the people's delegates are not the prologue but the epilogue of the insurrection [people, not working class, within the framework of a democratic revolution]. And [further](#), the organs of a new power (that of the people) have begun to spring up spontaneously, on the ground ploughed up by the political strike and fertilised with the blood of the champions of liberty. These organs are the revolutionary parties and militant organisations of the workers, peasants and other sections of the people who are waging a genuine revolutionary struggle. These organs are bringing about in practice the alliance between the socialist proletariat and the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie. We must now extend and consolidate this fighting alliance, give it shape and cement it, ...With this end in view, we shall conclude, and are concluding, a temporary fighting alliance with all the revolutionary-democratic forces to attain our common immediate political aim. It is to this end that, while strictly preserving our Party identity and independence, we enter the Soviets of Workers' Deputies and other revolutionary associations. [So, for Lenin and the Bolsheviks](#) the soviet of workers deputy is not a workers' parliaments, non an instrument of proletarian self-government, nor indeed an instrument of any self-government, but a militant organization for the attainment of specific goals.

In these passages, the Bolshevik line clearly emerges: support the soviets as structures of struggle and democratic alliance, but hostile whenever the councils evolved into self-governing bodies of the working class, outlining a workers' power. Not coincidentally, in October (the crucial month in which the St. Petersburg Soviet was formed), the Bolshevik city's organization drafted a resolution explicitly calling for the Soviet to adhere to the social democratic program. Just a few months before, at the Third Congress, Lenin had clashed with the *committees-men*, a tendency that considered the workers unconscious and limited their role in the party. It is precisely this environment that perceived the Soviets as structures alien to the revolutionary process and even dangerous, because autonomous from the party's control. This Bolshevik *attitude* deemed coexistence between the party and the soviet impossible. Not by chance, Mendeleev published an article in those October days emphasizing that the Soviets should limit themselves to trade union action, subordinate themselves to the party, and therefore dissolve. Therefore, from the perspective of the resolution, had it not been passed, party members would have had to resign. The Central Committee published this resolution at the end of October, somehow turning it into a general directive. An agitational campaign even began in the factories, although fortunately, the party did not act consistently everywhere. However, this initiative was halted in November with Lenin's arrival. Lenin even wrote an article for *Novaya Zhizn'* publicly opposing these sectarian tendencies ([Our Tasks and the Soviets of Workers' Deputies](#)). Indeed, the editorial board blocked it, and it was printed only in 1940: evidence of existing resistances. In any case, in this article the error of requesting the Soviets to adhere to a party program was recognized, as the Councils were interpreted as organs of the alliance between social democrats and radical bourgeois democrats, the nucleus of the future provisional government. Lenin maintained this position in the following years, continuing to see them as mere operational instruments of the insurrection, not as an expression of self-organization and self-government of the class.

Trotsky arrived in St. Petersburg having already undergone an initial breakdown with the Bolsheviks at the Second Congress of the RSDLP (1903, [Our Political Tasks](#), against Lenin's centralized approach) and also a second breakdown with the *Mensheviks* in the autumn of 1904 (due to their participation in the *banquet campaign*). In that first years of the century, collaboration with Parvus grew, during which they refined a comprehensive understanding of the capitalist mode of production, focusing on the general strike and the processes of self-organization of the class. With this contradictory path, he initially pursued a political line like that of the Bolsheviks: political strike, insurrection, and provisional government. For him, the Soviets were primarily a tool for unifying the proletariat, merging the various layers and sectors of the class, as well as different political groups. Trotsky had assimilated the problems and complexity of the class activation

process, having engaged with Luxemburg in preceding years. Thus, the Soviets were seen as a necessary tool for mass self-organization, aimed at the political general strike. Unlike the Bolshevik approach, he immediately grasped their importance in the fight against the regime, for their ability to unite and lead the masses. Building on the experience of 1905, Trotsky then formulated a real turning point in [Results and Prospects](#) [1906]: the necessity of conducting a *permanent revolution* due to the uneven and combined development of capital. In an integrated world market, in a backwards country where capitalist development was driven by international capital and the state, the bourgeoisie in Russia had roots too weak and harbored too great a fear of an already organized proletariat to successfully carry out the democratic revolution. In fact, these elements had already been emphasized in 1904 and 1905 by various figures [*Parvus, Mehring, Luxemburg, even Kautsky and obviously Lenin, as we saw just now*]: the innovation Trotsky introduced in 1906 was that the proletariat had to continuously pursue the realization of a socialist program, in contrast to Lenin's line. As [he noted in 1909](#), *Self-limitation by a workers' government would mean nothing other than the betrayal of the interests of the unemployed and strikers (more, of the whole proletariat) in the name of the establishment of a republic. The revolutionary authorities will be confronted with the objective problems of socialism, but the solution of these problems will, at a certain stage, be prevented by the country's economic backwardness. There is no way out from this contradiction within the framework of a national revolution. The workers' government will from the start be faced with the task of uniting its forces with those of the socialist proletariat of Western Europe. Only in this way will its temporary revolutionary hegemony become the prologue to a socialist dictatorship. Thus permanent revolution will become, for the Russian proletariat, a matter of class self-preservation. If the workers' party cannot show sufficient initiative for aggressive revolutionary tactics, if it limits itself to the frugal diet of a dictatorship that is merely national and merely democratic, the united reactionary forces of Europe will waste no time in making it clear that a working class, if it happens to be in power, must throw the whole of its strength into the struggle for a socialist revolution.* Thus, for Trotsky, the workers' government faced the task of uniting all its forces with those of the socialist proletariat of Europe, to change the conditions of the world market by overturning the dominant mode of production. An elaboration that assigned to class self-organization, to the Soviets, the role of the new center of revolutionary power: no longer just a tool of struggle or unification of the proletariat, but an organ of working-class representation and therefore of the dictatorship of the proletariat. [Still, he underscored](#): *The substance of the Soviet was its effort to become an organ of public authority. The proletariat on one hand, the reactionary press on the other, have called the Soviet "a labor government"; this only reflects the fact that the Soviet was in reality an embryo of a revolutionary government. Insofar as the Soviet was in actual possession of authoritative power, it made use of it; insofar as the power was in the hands of the military and bureaucratic monarchy, the Soviet fought to obtain it. Prior to the Soviet, there had been revolutionary organizations among the industrial workingmen, mostly of a Social-Democratic nature. But those were organizations among the proletariat; their immediate aim was to influence the masses. The Soviet is an organization of the proletariat; its aim is to fight for revolutionary power. At the same time, the Soviet was an organized expression of the will of the proletariat as a class. In its fight for power the Soviet applied such methods as were naturally determined by the character of the proletariat as a class: its part in production; its numerical strength; its social homogeneity. In its fight for power the Soviet has combined the direction of all the social activities of the working class, including decisions as to conflicts between individual representatives of capital and labor. This combination was by no means an artificial tactical attempt: it was a natural consequence of the situation of a class which, consciously developing and broadening its fight for its immediate interests, had been compelled by the logic of events to assume a leading position in the revolutionary struggle for power. The main weapon of the Soviet was a political strike of the masses. The power of the strike lies in disorganizing the power of the government. The greater the "anarchy" created by a strike, the nearer its victory. This is true only where "anarchy" is not being created by anarchic actions. The class that puts into motion, day in and day out, the industrial apparatus and the governmental apparatus; the class that is able, by a sudden stoppage of work, to paralyze both industry and government, must be*

organized enough not to fall the first victim of the very “anarchy” it has created. The more effective the disorganization of government caused by a strike, the more the strike organization is compelled to assume governmental functions. The Council of Workmen’s Delegates introduces a free press. It organizes street patrols to secure the safety of the citizens. It takes over, to a greater or less extent, the post office, the telegraph, and the railroads. It makes an effort to introduce the eight hour workday. Paralyzing the autocratic government by a strike, it brings its own democratic order into the life of the working city population....By organizing Councils of Workmen’s Deputies all over the country, it showed that it was able to create authoritative power. ... the Soviet directs all the social activities of the proletariat as a whole and of its various parts; it outlines the steps to be taken by the proletariat, it gives them a slogan and a banner. This art of directing the activities of the masses on the basis of organized self-government, is here applied for the first time on Russian soil. In these reflections, Trotsky also grasped its profile of a new social order. The Soviet was, or at least aspired to be, a power organ. In [1907, Trotsky](#) remarked *There is no doubt, however, that the first new wave of the revolution will lead to the creation of Soviets all over the country.*

In 1917, indeed, the Soviets would be placed at the center of the revolutionary path. This would also be the ground for reconciliation between Lenin and Trotsky, starting from *The April Theses*: not only with the Bolshevik Party's shift towards *proletarian* dictatorship but also with a new interpretation of the Councils [*All power to the soviets!*]. This turnaround was also the result of reflection on imperialism and the role of the State, initially put forward by Bukharin in polemics with Lenin himself. The dialectical relationship between working-class and party, between processes of mass self-organization and the role of the party, thus emerges in a complex dynamic, with profound theoretical discontinuities that would allow for the development of a *councilist* approach capable of countering both conciliatory and vanguardist tendencies.

1917, COUNCILS AND PARTY

The Bolsheviks and the Soviets: the continuity of a political stance. In 1905, as we have seen, the Bolsheviks set themselves the goal of establishing a *revolutionary provisional government*, expressing a worker and peasant democratic dictatorship, the result of the party's insurrectional action within the framework of the constituent assembly. This political line remained unchanged by the party after the revolution. In February/March 1917, when a new revolution suddenly erupted again, this remained their reference point: that is, the conduct of the revolutionary intervention remained entrusted to the structures of the party or to the committees directed by them. As *Shlyapnikov* wrote [Anweiler, *The Soviets, 1905-1917*, 1974, p. 145] *We deliberately did not plan for an unaffiliated organ to lead the semi-spontaneous movement.* Consequently, the Bolsheviks did not call for the formation of workers' councils: in the manifesto *To all citizens of Russia* of February 28 [Julian calendar, 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar we use today], the Soviets were not even mentioned: instead, they called for the prompt establishment of a provisional government to allow the birth of a new republican order. This approach confirmed the notion that the revolutionary prelude should entail the seizure of power, while its culmination should involve the establishment of a new democratic order. Certainly, not all of the Bolshevik party shared this conception and practice, as it was something much more dynamic and articulated than what is conveyed by a certain historical tradition. This attitude, unfortunately, also dominates in some revolutionary communist sectors. For example, on March 1, the Vyborg section of the party (the working-class district of the capital, one of the main revolutionary strongholds of the country with *Kronstadt*, the nearby military port) called for the Petrograd Soviet to declare itself a provisional revolutionary government and prepared a manifesto stating that until the convocation of the constituent assembly, all power must be concentrated in the Councils of workers and soldiers, the only possible revolutionary government. Or again, the Moscow Committee of the party called for the formation of the Soviets already on the night of February 27, then acted for their concrete development together with other socialist groups in the city. This was, actually, the stance of the small

independent group calling itself *Mezhraionsty* [inter-district], which included Trotsky and his close comrades. These voices remained isolated within the Bolshevik leadership: only two members of the Petrograd Committee supported them. Moreover, when Stalin and Kamenev arrived in March from Siberia, they not only reiterated the classical Bolshevik line, but further diluted it: they considered necessary to exhaust the energies of the current provisional government before further developments of the revolutionary initiative. The editorials of *Pravda*, based on the resolutions of 1906, therefore invited the formation of councils only as tasks of local party structures, precisely as possible instruments of their action.

April Theses. As widely known, Lenin's arrival in Petrograd precipitated a sudden and profound shift. Its principles were outlined in his inaugural speech at the *Finland Station*, emphasizing the socialist nature of the Russian revolution. Subsequently, the so-called Theses were presented on the evening of April 3 to a gathering of 200 militants at the Bolshevik headquarters. They were met by the leadership with genuine surprise and widespread disapproval, ultimately being rejected by the Central Committee and published on a personal basis in *Pravda* on April 7 [[On the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Current Revolution](#)]. The theses were articulated in ten points, emphasizing that (1) *Unquestionably Russia remains part a predatory imperialist war owing to the capitalist nature of that government*; (2) *Russia is passing from the first stage of the revolution, in the hands of the bourgeoisie, to its second stage, which must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants*; (3) *No support for the provisional government*; (4) *The masses must be made to see that the Soviets of Workers' Deputies are the only possible form of revolutionary government. Recognition of the fact that in most of the Soviets of Workers' Deputies our Party is in a minority, so far a small minority...As long as we are in the minority we carry on the work of criticising and exposing errors [a patient, systematic, and persistent explanation of the errors of their tactics, an explanation especially adapted to the practical needs of the masses], and we preach the necessity of transferring the entire state power to the Soviets of Workers' Deputies, so that the people may overcome their mistakes by experience*; (5) *Russia should evolve into a republic of Soviets of Workers*, mirroring the principles of the Commune; (6) *The seizure of large estates and the nationalization of land under the Soviets of Agricultural Labourers' Deputies, to distributed the land among peasants*; (7) *The immediate union of all banks in the country into a single national bank, and the institution of control over it by the Soviet*; (8) *It is not our immediate task to "introduce" socialism, but only to bring social production and the distribution of products at once under the control of the Soviets of Workers' Deputies*; (9) *Immediate convocation of a Party congress; Alteration of the Party Programme on the question of imperialism and the imperialist war, on our attitude towards the state and our demand for a "commune state", and of our out-of-date minimum programme, change of the Party's name*; (10) *A new International*.

Lenin's Dual Break. These theses marked a double break with Bolshevik theory and tradition.

First, they embraced the aim of a second revolution, shelving the concept of democratic dictatorship and effectively converging with Trotsky. As we have seen, for Trotsky (and Parvus, who had developed this vision with him between 1904 and 1906), the *uneven and combined* dynamics of capitalist development created significant industrial concentrations even in peripheral or economically underdeveloped areas, like Russia. This capitalist development was initiated by foreign capitals (imperialisms) and actively supported by political power (state intervention). This dynamic constituted a particular social structure in a peasant country, with a strong organized working class and a feeble bourgeoisie. Lenin fully agreed with this since the late 1800s, assigning the proletariat the task of leading a democratic revolution. However, the international framework in which Trotsky and Parvus placed this dynamic highlighted how these social relations (in Russia and in the world market) rendered a democratic phase unsustainable and necessitated a *permanent revolution* to avoid a return to a reactionary dictatorship (the only condition for continuing capitalist development). Faced with the First World War and the explicit emergence of imperialist dynamics, Lenin thus made a shift in these positions and clearly articulated the goal of the socialist transcendence of the democratic revolution.

Second, they advocated for the necessity of discontinuity not only in political direction but also in power apparatus, aiming to construct a new revolutionary state. This reflection, actually, originated from Bukharin, who in 1915 wrote [Imperialism and World Economy](#). In this text, he emphasized the new role that the state assumed in imperialist competition, with direct intervention in organizing production and controlling the economy. Bukharin termed this transition *state capitalism*, drawing on Engels' concept from some reflections in *Anti-Duhring*: in that 19th-century text, analyzing Bismarck's nationalization of railways Engels underscored the possibility that capital could concentrate some means of production in the hands of the state, without changing the mode of production. Bukharin continued this reflection in 1915, deeming it necessary to challenge the prevailing theory of the state in the social-democratic movement, its direct use to construct the new mode of production, in contrast to anarchists. Drawing on Marx's reasoning about the Commune, he explicitly defined the goal of a different power system. This *need* was also outlined from another angle in 1912 by Pannekoek in a series of articles in polemics with... Kautsky [Mass Action and Revolution, [Marxist Theory and Revolutionary Tactics](#), [Socialism and Anarchism](#): *The struggle of the proletariat is not merely a struggle against the bourgeoisie for state power, but a struggle against state power.... The content of this [the proletarian] revolution is the destruction and dissolution [Auflosung] of the instruments of power of the state with the aid of the instruments of power of the proletariat. The struggle will cease only when, as the result of it, the state organization is completely destroyed. The organization of the majority will then have demonstrated its superiority by destroying the organization of the ruling minority*]. Lenin vehemently contested the Bukharin's interpretation, refusing to publish his articles and accusing him of deviation and anarchism, only to later delve deeper into this new perspective and make it organic in [State and Revolution](#) [a book announced already in March 1917, in the third *letter from abroad*, as an article on the Commune and distortions of the state in Kautsky, written during summer exile in Finland]. In this dual break with his previous positions Lenin brought him closer to Trotsky and sparked the polemic with Bukharin. He placed the *Councils* at the center of the revolutionary strategy, first as instruments of the second revolution, and second as infrastructure for a different political power. He thus placed the conquest of the Soviet, the conquest of the majority in the Councils, as a condition of the revolutionary process. Therefore, he assigned them a prominent role in the making of the new socialist power. The party did not exhaust its role but had to dialectically relate to them and proceed to conquer power through them, only after gaining a majority.

Dissensions and resistances. This double rupture led to an open resistance. As *Bucharin* recalled a few years later, *a part of our party—indeed, not a small part—viewed this line almost as a betrayal of Marxist ideology*. Kamenev emphasized that *the way to socialism lies, not in the seizure of isolated factories, not in isolated independent communes, but in conquest of the central apparatus of government and economic life*. Nogin, on the other hand, expressed the opinion that the Soviets should gradually delegate their functions to trade unions, parties, and self-governing organs of the class (*factory committees*). Kalinin stated that it was incorrect to assert that the Soviets represented the sole revolutionary form of government: in doing so, the Menshevik program of revolutionary self-government of 1905 would be embraced. Even Stalin initially opposed it, as we have seen, leading an expectant line with Kamenev: at the first national conference, at the end of March, he even argued that the provisional government was essentially consolidating revolutionary achievements and proposed a motion to initiate unification with the Mensheviks. The discussion on the April Theses permeated the party for almost a month. In the initial vote in the Petrograd committee (April 12), they were rejected 13 to 2 (1 abstention). However, some sectors staunchly supported the new line: foremost among them were the factory vanguards in Vyborg (which, as we have seen, had anticipated its essential points), as well as the young Moscow recruits (*Smirnov, Osinskii, Lomov, Sokolnikov, Muralov*, to whom Bukharin soon joined). These comrades had joined the Bolshevik ranks in the 1905 revolution and would constitute the core of the party's left in the ensuing years. Thus, at the *Petrograd conference* (April 19), the theses were approved with 20 votes against 6 (9 abstentions), and at the *Seventh All-Russian*

Conference (April 24-29), they garnered the majority, although on some points not by a particularly wide margin (the specific resolution on the socialist objective of the revolution received only 71 votes in favor out of 118, 60%), while Lenin collected his sole vote on the change of the party's name. These resistances demonstrate not only how deeply entrenched the line of *democratic dictatorship* was, but also how large a portion of the party struggled to assume a dialectical relationship with the working class, viewing themselves (the *organized vanguard*) as the sole necessary and sufficient subject to lead the revolutionary process. This approach, as we have seen, had deep roots in the Bolshevik experience, in that substantial part of the party that had been shaped in the polemic with the economists and in the construction of *Bolshevik* committees, with their organizational inclinations.

The making of the Soviets in 1917. The *April Theses* emerged in a period marked by rapid changes. The soviets, *the soldiers and working-class councils*, had developed independently of Bolshevik action. They emerged not only as organs of united fronts and instruments of control over the provisional government but also as genuine structures of revolutionary counter-power. From this perspective, the class dynamics anticipated the party and, in a way, propelled the assertion of a revolutionary line among the Bolsheviks. The revolution was triggered on February 18 by a strike at the Putilov workshops, which quickly spread. By the 22nd, 200,000 workers were already involved. In a matter of days, an insurrectional dynamic emerged, lacking explicit direction and defined leadership but not occurring in a *vacuum*. The movement developed on the same fabric of relationships, imaginaries, and social representations as in 1905. From February 24, the first delegates were elected in some factories, while various socialist groups considered forming a *soviet* between the 23rd and 25th. The crucial step, however, was taken on the 27th by recently released worker vanguards, who marched to the Duma and self-appointed themselves as the provisional executive committee of the Council of Workers' Deputies. They immediately issued a call for delegate elections. At the initial session, only about fifty delegates were present, but the soviet began to organize, nonetheless. By February 28, they were able to publish *Izvestija*, and most factories elected their delegates that day, with the evening session seeing the participation of as many as 120 delegates. On March 1, the Petrograd Executive Committee and Duma agreed to elect a *provisional government*, dominated by liberals. The Soviet approved a motion about on the 2nd, with only 19 opposing votes, but it declared itself the organ of control of the democratic revolution vis-à-vis the government. This dynamic rapidly extended to military units, driven by the demand for peace amidst the backdrop of war. The Councils proliferated throughout the spring, expanding into different districts of Petrograd, the countryside, and military garrisons. By the end of March, they were present in all major cities, industrial centers, and significant military encampments. Order number 1 of the Petrograd Council of Workers and Soldiers mandated the election of Councils throughout the army, down to the company, battalion, and regimental levels, as well as on every ship. Peasant Soviets, however, formed slowly, often prompted by soldiers, starting from the largest agricultural centers. By the end of July, there were 52 in provinces out of 78, but only in 317 out of 812 districts and very few *volosts* (smaller administrative divisions). The precise number of all Soviets was never determined, but it's estimated that by May, there were over 400, rising to 600 by August, and reaching 900 by October. The first All-Russian Conference (March 29/April 3) brought together 138 Soviets of workers and soldiers, 7 army councils, 13 military base councils, and 26 unit councils at the front. The *first All-Russian Congress* in May saw elected delegates from each Soviet based on population size. It's worth noting the importance of Moscow in this context. The *Moscow Council* was formed at the urging of the Bolshevik structure. Its *provisional committee* brought together all the socialist components of the Duma, representatives of the Zemstvo (districts), trade unions, and worker components in the war industry committee. Similar to Petrograd, delegates were elected on February 28, and the Councils convened in early March. In Moscow, however, two different councils were elected: one for workers and one for soldiers.

Councils and representation. The *Petrograd Soviets* quickly reached around 1,200 members, and by mid-March, it approached 3,000 members. Among these, approximately 2,000 were soldiers, with only 800 to

900 workers, despite the city's workforce being at least three times larger than the military contingent. This disproportion arose because while one delegate was elected per one thousand workers in factories, each unit in the army had one delegate, even for companies consisting of 100 to 200 men. There were also evident disparities among workers: *large factories* with over 400 employees gathered 87% of workers but only had 400 delegates, while *smaller factories* with 13% of employees had an equal number of delegates. This dynamic wasn't limited to the capital: for instance, in the two Moscow Councils in June, there were over 1,700 delegates, but the workers' council was smaller (just over 500 delegates), favoring representation from smaller entities (one delegate per 500 workers, with no more than three from a single factory). To make the Petrograd Council functional, given the large number of delegates, by the end of April two *smaller councils* were established, one for workers and one for soldiers, each consisting of about 300 delegates. These began to hold both joint and separate sessions. The *Executive Committee*, modeled after that of 1905, quickly grew to 42 members, including a president (*Chkheidze*), two vice-presidents (*Skobelev* and *Kerensky*), as well as representatives from unions, socialist organizations in the Duma, district councils, and the *Izvestija* editorial board (non-voting). Due to the size, a *7 members Bureau* was created for operational reasons, authorized to make decisions in emergency situations, subject to confirmation at the plenary session of the Committee. In the following months, an additional 16 provincial representatives were added, expanding the Bureau to 24 members, meeting daily, while the executive committee met three times a week. As in 1905, delegates were elected in assembly by a show of hands, effectively using *a nominal and majoritarian mechanism*. This was a big difference with the contemporary shop-stewards election in a lot of experience [secret ballot in a *ballot box*, often on a list vote]. The Menshevik component was dominant in the early months, holding strong positions in both the Duma and unions, as well as among delegates elected in factories. In early March, the Bolshevik group was formed with around forty members (two-thirds soldiers), among 2,000 to 3,000 delegates. The *Kronstadt Soviet* was the only one to have Bolshevik influence from the spring, although there was a higher presence in various other contexts compared to the capital. However, almost everywhere, the majority representation in the councils was held by the *Socialist Revolutionaries*. At the *First All-Russian Conference* (March), around half of the one thousand delegates were *Socialist Revolutionaries*, with only 14 being Bolsheviks; at the *First Congress* (May), out of 822 voting delegates, there were 285 *Socialist Revolutionaries*, 248 *Mensheviks*, 105 *Bolsheviks* and affiliates, 73 Independents, and about a hundred of other small organizations.

The Factory Committees. Territorial *soviets* were not the sole structures in which workers organized themselves. Since late February, factory committees proliferated [*fabricno-zavodskie komitety*], even more extensively than in 1905. This was due to the fall of the Tsarist regime, where the Petrograd Soviet introduced the eight-hour workday and established factory representation [*sovet y starost*]. The activities of these structures mirrored what we commonly attribute to factory councils, now in Italy, after experiencing the '*long hot autumn*': negotiations on wages, hours, and working conditions within the plant; managing relationships among workers; providing cultural and educational assistance; representing workers' interests more broadly vis-à-vis legal and social institutions. Compared to the soviets, the composition of factory committees was less stable, subject to the fluctuations of their own reality. The *Committees* quickly evolved, articulating worker demands and establishing practices of *workers' control* aimed at managing production and marginalizing corporate management. In practice, in many cases, they intervened in economic, administrative, and even technical matters, sometimes displacing managers and engineers. If owners shuttered factories, the committees often directly assumed control of the enterprise: already in May, a *government report* noted how factory committees did not hesitate to directly engage in organizing their economic activities. The spread of these committees, along with their growing influence in factories, marginalized trade union organizations (beyond certain sectors, such as railways). This spontaneous movement radicalized broad segments of the working class through self-governance of their own productive realities. On the disintegration of the so-called established order, it capitalized the counter-power of the

soviets, which guaranteed their action. Trade union leadership and the Mensheviks, indeed, often sought to limit their roles in the name of the general principle of revolutionary centralization, unlike the Bolsheviks who supported their development alongside anarchists and revolutionary trade union factions. Within the new framework of the *April Theses*, with the objective of supporting and encouraging class self-organization, the demand for worker control was fully embraced by the party. This stance was a significant element in the gradual garnering of support within the organized working class: in the April elections at the Putilov Works, out of 22 members of the factory committee, 6 were Bolsheviks and 7 were sympathizers; at the first Petrograd conference (late May), a resolution on worker control presented by Zinoviev was approved with 297 in favor, 21 against, and 44 abstentions. In the city's second conference (in August, amidst the repression against the July uprising), a similar resolution was approved with 213 in favor, 26 against, and 22 abstentions. However, it must be noted that this dynamic did not occur everywhere: for example, in Moscow at the city conference of factory committees (in July), out of 682 delegates, only 191 supported the Bolshevik resolution.

The July Days marked a pivotal moment during the revolution. Various military and worker sectors organized a massive demonstration, driven by the ongoing war, particularly spurred by Defense Minister Kerensky's new offensive. This mobilization sparked an insurrectional surge. By June, widespread protests had already emerged in response to preparations for the offensive. The Bolshevik Party's military organization had initially planned an armed demonstration against the war's resumption. This initiative was halted by the Soviet and Lenin himself intervening to ensure its cancellation. The subsequent demonstration, held the following week under the auspices of the Soviets and unarmed, nonetheless transformed into a mobilization of 400,000 individuals protesting the government, advocating for peace, and demanding power for the Soviets. Anarcho-communist sectors, linked to the Petrograd Federation, subsequently planned further protests for early July. At this juncture, three separate structures of the Bolshevik Party coexisted in the capital, with limited coordination between them. A situation revealing the gap between the perceived centralized image of the party and the reality on the ground. These structures included the *Central Committee* (the highest governing body), the pan-Russian *Military Organization*, and the *Petrograd Committee*. Many rank-and-file Bolshevik members increasingly viewed a swift insurrection as both inevitable and desirable. The Military Organization, along with significant factions of the Petrograd Committee, actively supported the action against the provisional government, despite explicit objections from the CC, and notwithstanding the positions of Lenin, Trotsky, and other key leaders. The events of July 3 saw the *First Machine Gun Regiment* mutiny and initiate a mobilization that gradually involved the most militant Bolshevik factions. The ensuing demonstration amassed over 60,000 to 70,000 participants and besieged the Soviet palace, demanding to seize power and end the war. However, the following day, despite efforts by Bolshevik leaders to maintain peaceful demonstrations, a new demonstration came under sniper fire and was shelled by some Cossack units. In this volatile atmosphere, certain military units, particularly the *First Machine Gun Regiment* and the *Bolshevik Kronstadt sailors* who had recently arrived in the city, once again besieged the Soviet. Chernov, a prominent SR figure, attempted to negotiate but was assaulted. He was narrowly rescued by Trotsky, with difficulty, despite his strained relationship with the Kronstadt sailors. Nonetheless, the Bolshevik leadership endeavored to maintain peaceful demonstrations. On July 5, however, the Soviet Executive Committee, in conjunction with the Military District of Petrograd, initiated a military operation to reclaim control of the capital, resulting in the arrest of several Bolshevik leaders and prompting Lenin to go into hiding.

April Theses and July Theses: the resurgence of vanguardist tendencies. On July 13th, a clandestine conference of the Central Committee was convened. For this gathering, Lenin formulated the [so-called July Theses](#). These new theses diverged significantly from those of April, comprising four main points: (1) *The counter-revolution has become organised and consolidated, and has actually taken state power into its hands*, presenting a scenario of a *virtually military dictatorship* disguised by democratic institutions; (2) *The*

leaders of the Soviets and of the Socialist-Revolutionary and Menshevik parties...have completely betrayed the cause of the revolution by putting it in the hands of the counter-revolutionaries; (3) The slogan "All Power to the Soviets!" was a slogan for peaceful development of the revolution, it is no longer correct, for it does not take into account that power has changed hands, ..the aim of the insurrection can only be to transfer power to the proletariat, supported by the poor peasants, with a view to putting our Party programme into effect; (4) The party of the working class, without abandoning legal activity but never for a moment overrating it, must c o m b i n e legal with illegal work, as it did in 1912–14. In essence, the preparation of an armed communist insurrection is the sole means to overthrow the dictatorship.

Subsequent months revealed the stark contrast of this analysis with the real situation, due to the Kornilov's coup attempt. Lenin's directives advocated for the abandonment of any involvement in the Soviets in response to the risk of losing all achieved ground: he viewed these workers body as mere tools of the dictatorship. This shift signaled not only a departure from the tactical slogans of the *April Theses* but also from the entire dialectical process of building the revolutionary process through class self-organization and the development of new power structures. This was significant. The focus of initiative reverted solely to the party, akin to the pre-spring stance, with the objective of an armed insurrection for a government of workers and poor peasants. *Ordzonikidze* later suggested that Lenin considered transferring the role of insurgent organs to factory committees, which were more inclined towards Bolshevik proposals. In the framework of the *July Theses*, indeed, their role more closely resembled what Lenin had envisioned for the Soviets in 1906: simple instruments of the party's insurrectionary action, rather than the organizational bodies of the class and the development of the new transitional power, as outlined in April.

The party's response to the July Theses. Unlike in April, the party was not persuaded. It wasn't so much due to resistance from its leadership (although such resistance existed, as in April), but rather because of indications from its grassroots members, actively engaged in Vyborg and other areas. At the CC meeting on July 13, Lenin's document was rejected with 10 opposing votes out of 15. According to *Rabinowitch* [[The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd](#), Pluto, 2017], among the most determined opponents were *Nogin*, *Rykov*, and *Volodarsky* [an inter-district leader, among the main agitators at the Putilov plant], besides *Zinoviev* who sent a written intervention. Among the most ardent supporters were *Sverdlov* and *Molotov*. The resolution approved by that CC did not fully acknowledge the subservience of the provisional government to the counter-revolution, nor did it renounce the slogan of *All power to the Soviets*. Instead, it pointed out the immediate need to transfer power to the Soviets, which should take decisive steps to end the war, cease compromises with the bourgeoisie, distribute land, establish workers' control, and suppress the reactionary forces. These were the primary themes on which Bolshevik consensus had developed in the preceding months within factories and the army. Lenin reacted to this decision with anger and alarm, writing [On Slogans](#), an article denouncing the inability of vanguard parties to understand the new situation in the face of a sudden turn, repeating slogans that were right until yesterday but have now lost their meaning. Lenin, therefore, reiterated that power was now in the hands of the *Cavignacs* [[the organizer of the bloody repression of June 1848](#) in Paris], the Soviets had failed, and a new cycle had to begin without the *old classes, old parties, old Soviets*.

The party's final decision on the July Theses occurred during the VI Congress, at the end of the month, with over 150 delegates present, in the absence of Lenin, Trotsky, and several leaders either imprisoned or in hiding. Initially, Stalin aligned himself with Lenin's position: at first cautiously, and then more assertively, delivering the congress report on the political situation. Stalin argued that the Soviets were collaborating *quietly with the bourgeoisie*: engaging with them meant falling *into the enemy's hands*. Therefore, *armed insurrection was necessary*, and in the event of victory, power should be handed over to *a worker's government supported by poor peasants*. Once in power, they would know how to organize it, thus reaffirming the old approach to seizing power as a prologue to the revolutionary process. Just before his report, Lenin's article *On slogans* was printed by the Kronstadt sailors and distributed to the delegates. Stalin

then presented a 10-point document, possibly written by Lenin, which echoed its main elements. Among those who supported these views were Molotov [*we cannot fight in favor of Soviets that have betrayed the proletariat*], Sokolnikov [*I don't know in which Marxist manual it is written that only the Soviets are revolutionary organs; the Soviets ceased to be revolutionary when cannons moved against the working class*], Smilga [*Power lies in the hands of a military clique; we must overthrow the existing government*], and Bubnov [*The Soviets are now powerless; we must abandon that slogan*]. However, at the Petrograd conference, all 18 amendments proposed by Molotov were rejected, the final document mirrored that of CC and was approved with 28 votes in favor, 3 against, and 28 abstentions. At the congress, particularly strong opposition to the *July Theses* came from Volodarsky [*As the government moves to the right, Soviets and parties move to the left; it is dangerous to isolate ourselves from them*], Jurenev [who recalled *The party's consolidation within the Soviets, the risk of isolation, the need for a radical reformulation of point eight*], and some Moscow leaders, who emphasized the importance of defending the Soviets. In the end, 8 out of 15 interventions supported the need to maintain the line on power to the Soviets, while Bukharin took a middle ground. A compromise motion was drafted by a committee to break the deadlock, subsequently voted on by a large majority: it acknowledged the transition to a counter-revolutionary dictatorship but emphasizing the need to protect mass organizations and particularly the Soviets from counter-revolutionary attacks. In early September the Bolsheviks secured the majority in the Petrograd Soviet with this approach, just before Kornilov's announcement and the new political turn. However, on August 7 the *Petrograd Council of workers and soldiers* had already approved a resolution against the arrests of internationalists, demonstrating that it was not exactly an instrument of the counter-revolution. Moreover, by late August, the Bolshevik Party came second in the elections for the capital's Duma (180,000 votes, behind the 200,000 of the SRs, ahead of the 114,000 *Democrats*, and the 23,000 *Mensheviks*): they had broad support in the city. The resistance against Kornilov's reactionary coup, the opposition to the provisional government, and thus the October Revolution were conducted with growing consensus, securing the majority in the Soviets (following the path outlined in the April Theses) and seizing power through the Councils (not against them). However, from a certain point of view, the *July turn* left its mark on Lenin. For example, in a letter dated September 13 to the CC, concerned that the timing of the insurrection was dragging on, he strongly emphasized the need to seize the opportunity, indifferent to the need to verify the Bolshevik majority at the *Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets*, going so far as to describe any delay as *complete idiocy or complete betrayal*. Trotsky imposed a different timing on that occasion, not for a formal reason but precisely to mark the political legitimacy of the insurrection and to take power not as a party but as a new revolutionary form of the State: the Soviets.

Revolution, class, and party. In 1917, the Bolshevik Party aligned itself with the aim of a second revolutionary and transitory rupture, departing from the classic Bolshevik line of democratic dictatorship. It also recognized the need to develop a *revolutionary power*, a new apparatus distinct from the capitalist state, which bore the imprint of class relations and labor subordination. Consequently, it developed a strategy that departed from tradition, placing at the center of the revolutionary path not only the party but also the development of processes of self-organization and class protagonism. The party supported these practices not only as tools for insurrection and party intervention, but also as experiences of worker control over production processes, as evidenced by the factory committees. Particularly, the party supported the Soviets, territorial bodies elected by workers in their own workplaces, as spontaneous forms of coordination and organization of the class. This support stemmed from the recognition of these structures as a form of counter-power, or alternative power, to that of the capitalist state. Despite Lenin's differing inclination, this position was maintained in July and in September, leading to the acquisition of power through the councils and the establishment of a Soviet Republic. In this process, the party reformulated and completed the relationship between party and revolutionary process that had been defined at the end of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century, during polemics with reformists and economists. It emphasized

the indispensable role of a dialectic between party and class, mediated by mass processes and the class's capacity for self-organization.

The Soviet experience then ushered in another phase a different historical trajectory. Already in the spring of 1918 there was an initial centralization against workers' control, and hypotheses of state capitalism resurged. This was followed by the Civil War, imperialist encirclement, militarization, war communism, the crisis of March 1921 (revolts in the countryside and at Kronstadt), the *New Economic Policy* (NEP), the stagnation of workers' and party democracy, the development of the *Thermidor*, the tragic bureaucratic Stalinist regime, and the consolidation into a degenerated workers' state. But, as they say, that is *another story*. Nevertheless, as we have mentioned, some roots of these processes cannot escape the party's propensity to become autonomous from the working class. The vanguard tendencies assume forms and determinants after seizing power, encompassing a working class that has become dominant and the management of political power. It is no longer just about the relations between a subordinate working class and its political representatives (often a minority, frequently of the extreme vanguard), but it informed the complexity of social relations within a country. As Trotsky emphasized in [The Revolution Betrayed](#) (1936), these dynamics take on particular connotations and destinies in a backward and isolated country: the productive forces are still insufficient, and thus the tendency towards primitive accumulation, born out of necessity, permeates every aspect of the planned economy. Within this framework, social differentiation persists, determined by distribution norms that remain bourgeois in nature, and the bureaucracy becomes an uncontrollable caste, exploiting social antagonisms. *Not yet able to satisfy the elementary needs of the population, the Soviet economy creates and resurrects at every step tendencies to graft and speculation... The poverty and cultural backwardness of the masses has again become incarnate in the malignant figure of the ruler with a great club in his hand. The deposed and abused bureaucracy, from being a servant of society, has again become its lord. On this road it has attained such a degree of social and moral alienation from the popular masses, that it cannot now permit any control over wither its activities or its income.* To these considerations, it may be useful to add some of Bukharin's insights: at the moment of his shift from the left to the right of the party, the Moscow Bolshevik representative resumed some concerns about bureaucratization that Lenin was developing in his final contributions [[On Cooperation](#), [Reorganize Worker and Peasant Inspection](#), [Better fewer but Better](#)]. For instance, in *Proletarian Revolution and Culture* (1923), he emphasized how these risks of bureaucratization could be inherent in any socialist transition: the working class in every capitalist society is not only subordinate in relations of production but also in its political and cultural expression by the apparatuses of the State. These dynamics operate even in advanced social formation, indeed especially in advanced ones. The conquest of political power, even though organs of self-organization and self-government, is therefore not guaranteed to immediately liberate the working class from its habits and cultural constraints. Consequently, in the face of a proletariat just emerging from previous social relations, the party in the daily exercise of power may develop a vanguardist tendency to become autonomous. Bukharin, therefore, emphasized the risk that the party could transform into an independent bureaucratic class: a risk inherent in any revolutionary dynamic, not only in economically backward countries but also in advanced ones. Here, we add, the centrality of the relationship between working class and party emerges clearly, underscoring the importance of safeguarding Soviet democracy, institutions, council practices and their autonomy. It is not surprising, we might add, that Trotsky [[The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International](#), 1938] emphasized the need to restore not only the free democratic form to the soviets but also their working class content! This entails *the struggle for the freedom of the trade unions and the factory committees, for the right of assembly and freedom of the press will unfold in the struggle for the regeneration and development of Soviet democracy... Democratization of the soviets is impossible without legalization of soviet parties. The workers and peasants themselves by their own free vote will indicate what parties they recognize as soviet parties.* And finally, in this document, the *Old Man* emphasized the demand for a revision of planned economy from top to bottom in the interests

of producers and consumers! *Factory committees should be returned the right to control production. A democratically organized consumers' cooperative should control the quality and price of products.* In conclusion, then, we want to point out that perhaps it is no coincidence that the two revolutionary leaders who emphasized the risk of bureaucratic degeneration are the same ones responsible for the main elaborations that determined Lenin's revolutionary rupture in April 1917. However, these leaders followed very different paths: Trotsky consistently developed opposition to Soviet bureaucratic drift, while Bukharin accompanied it in its tragic arc and ultimately was engulfed by it firsthand.

What we wanted to emphasize, in any case, is that the Bolshevik experience itself indicates how the revolutionary process requires a careful balance between the party and the working class: the socialist transitional project and its democratic organization. Since then, a century has passed, marked by the difficulties of revolutionary processes in advanced capitalist countries, the development of fascism and state capitalisms, Stalinist degeneration, the Second World War and the long dominance of America, the construction of the Soviet bloc and its ability to control further revolutionary processes, the reformist and Stalinist hegemony over the labor movement, the Cold War and wars of national independence, the long expansive cycle of the *Thirty Glorious* years and the wave of protests, the crisis of the 1970s and the resurgence of globalization, the collapse of the USSR, the explosive development of capitalism in China without interruption from the People's Republic and the dominance of the *Washington Consensus*, the increasingly evident emergence of global warming, the explosion of a new Great Recession in 2006/08, the development within its framework of a new season of intense competition among the main capitalist poles. Throughout this century, the forms of organization and regulation of production, the configuration of the global market, and the international structure of capital and labor, as well as the dynamics of working-class struggle, have changed multiple times. All of this is still subject to trends and countertrends: these will change the organization of the class, its political consciousness, and the evolution of mass movements. What has not changed are the fundamental social relationships that are structured in production and, therefore, the underlying dynamics of the relationships between its main classes: capital, labor, and intermediate social sectors. Therefore, the need to organize a transitional political project has not changed, while the risks and consequences of the vanguardist party have been highlighted precisely in this tragic century. In a present marked by a proletariat increasingly fragmented into various social formations and identities, the challenges of supporting the processes of organization and self-organization within the working class, while dialectically engaging them with the revolutionary initiative of the party, are renewed even in this new season. Class, party, and councils are not then an endpoint but the starting point on which to try to articulate a revolutionary path for today and tomorrow.

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