New Essays

VOLUME 1
1934-1935

GREENWOOD

RADICAL PERIODICALS IN THE UNITED STATES

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NEW ESSAYS

A Quarterly Devoted to the Study of Modern Society

Volume 1
1934-1935

Introduction to the Greenwood reprint by
PAUL MATTICK
Former Editor, New Essays

Greenwood Reprint Corporation
Westport, Connecticut
1970

The following introduction by Paul Mattick consists of the reminiscences, present views and opinions of one of the persons most closely involved with this journal.

—THE PUBLISHER

Introduction

This series of publications, which appeared during the years 1934 to 1943 under the title *International Council Correspondence,* later to be renamed *Living Marxism* and, finally, *New Essays,* expressed the political ideas of a group of American workers concerned with the proletarian class struggle, the conditions of economic depression and worldwide war. Calling themselves Council Communists,[1] the group was equally far removed from the traditional Socialist party, the new Communist party, and the various "opposition" parties that these movements brought forth. It rejected the ideologies and organizational concepts of the parties of the Second and Third Internationals, as well as those of the stillborn "Fourth International." Based on Marxist theory, the group adhered to the principle of working-class self-determination through the establishment of workers' councils for the capture of political power and the transformation of the capitalist into a Socialist system of production and distribution. It could be regarded, therefore, only as a propaganda organization advocating the self-rule of the working class. Because of the relative obscurity of this group and its ideas, it may be well to deal briefly with its antecedents.

Labor organizations tend to see in their steady growth and everyday activities the major ingredients of social change. It was, however, the unorganized mass of workers in the first of the twentieth-century revolutions that determined the character of the revolution and brought into being its own, new form of organization in the spontaneously arising workers' and soldiers' councils. The council, or soviet, system of the Russian Revolution of 1905 disappeared with the crushing of the revolution, only to return in

greater force in the February Revolution of 1917. It was these councils that inspired the formation of similar spontaneous organizations in the German Revolution of 1918 and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in the social upheavals in England, France, Italy, and Hungary. With the council system, a form of organization arose that could lead and coordinate the self-activities of very broad masses for either limited ends or for revolutionary goals, and that could do so independently of, in opposition to, or in collaboration with existing labor organizations. Most of all, the rise of the council system proved that spontaneous activities need not dissipate in formless mass exertions, but could issue into organizational structures of a more than temporary nature.

In both Russia and Germany the actual content of the revolution was not equal to its revolutionary form. Although in Russia it was mainly general objective unreadiness for a Socialist transformation, in Germany it was the subjective unwillingness to institute socialism by revolutionary means that largely accounts for the failures of the council movement. The great mass of German workers mistook the political for a social revolution. The ideological and organizational strength of social democracy had left its mark; the socialization of production was seen as a governmental concern, not as the task of the workers themselves. The workers' councils, which had made the revolution, abdicated in favor of political democracy. In Russia, the slogan "All Power to the Soviets" had been advanced by the Bolsheviks for tactical and opportunistic reasons. Once in power, however, the Bolshevik government dismantled the soviet system to secure its own authoritarian rule. The Russian soviets proved unable to forestall the transformation of the soviet into a party dictatorship.

It is clear that workers' self-organization is no guarantee against policies and actions contrary to proletarian class interests. In that case, however, they are superseded by traditional or new forms of control, by the old or newly established authorities. Unless spontaneous movements, issuing into organizational forms of proletarian self-determination, usurp control over society and therewith over their own lives, they are bound to disappear again into the anonymity of mere potentiality. This is not true, of course, for the minority of conscious revolutionaries who expect and prepare for new social struggles and to that end concern themselves not only with the critique of capitalist society but also with the criticism of the means required to put an end to it.

This accounts for the Left opposition within the Communist movement, which arose as early as 1918 and directed itself against the opportunism of the Bolshevik party in its endeavor to secure the existence of the Bolshevik government. Although bad experiences with bourgeois parliamentarianism and with the class-collaborationist practices of trade unionism had turned Western Communists into antiparliamentarians and anti-trade unionists, and thus into supporters of the council movement, the Bolsheviks insisted on a reversal of policies and the return to parliamentarianism and trade unionism. The Communist parties were split and their left wings excluded from the Communist International. Lenin's pamphlet, *Radicalism, an Infantile Disease of Communism* (1920) was written to destroy the influence of the *Left* in western Europe.

With the prestige of success on their side, and with the material means available to government to influence or destroy rival social movements, the Bolsheviks succeeded in reducing Left communism to practical insignificance. But it was never completely extinguished and has continued to exist in small groups in a number of countries down to the present day. For a time, it even won a hearing in the United States, where the lack of revolutionary conditions condemned communism to exist in merely ideological form. The formation of groups of council Communists was first made possible here during the Great Depression, which saw the spontaneous growth of organizations of the jobless and of councils of the unemployed.

With the demise of the unemployed movement, the group of council Communists elected to continue to function as an educational organization. A split in the Proletarian party added to their membership and made possible the publication of *Council Correspondence*. At the founding of the group it adopted the temporary name United Workers party, soon to be changed to Council Communists. It was, perhaps, due to the character of the group and its

intentions that it failed to attract intellectuals into its ranks. With the exception of articles translated from European sources, all the material published in *Council Correspondence* was written by employed or unemployed workers. Contributions were not signed because they expressed the opinions of the group even when written by individuals. There was, of course, no money available to pay for printing, and the magazine was produced by voluntary labor. Only with an increase in the number of readers, which coincided with a membership decline in the group, did it become both possible and necessary to print the journal. In view of the reduced membership, however, it was clear that *Council Correspondence* did not promote the growth of the organization but was practically no more than a vehicle for the elucidation of the ideas of council communism. For this reason the change of name to *Living Marxism* was decided upon. Eventually, however, the general decline of radicalism resulting from America's entry into World War II made the name *Living Marxism* seem rather pretentious, as well as a hindrance in the search for a wider circulation. It was changed to *New Essays,* but this did not yield the hoped-for results. After a few issues it became clear that a sufficient number of subscribers to make the magazine financially viable was not forthcoming.

Throughout the existence of *International Council Correspondence* no attempt was made to simplify its style or content to suit less-educated workers. The intention was to raise their level of understanding and to acquaint them with the complexities of social, economic, and political issues. The magazine was also written for politically advanced workers and for the council Communists themselves so as to improve the collective knowledge of the group. It was a forum for discussion, unhampered by any specific dogmatic point of view, and open to new ideas that had some relevance to the council movement. The magazine eventually succeeded in attracting contributions from Socialist writers who were not associated with the group. And it had, of course, at its disposal the work of some academic people, for instance, Anton Pannekoek (writing under the pseudonym J. Harper), an advocate of workers' councils since their very inception. Others, like Otto Rühle, had been active in the workers' councils in the German revolution. It was Karl Korsch, however, who became *Living Marxism*'s most prominent academic contributor as well as theoretician of the council movement.

Because large-scale unemployment was the most important aspect of the depression years, it received special attention in *Council Correspondence*—particularly with regard to self-help organizations and direct actions that attempted to alleviate the miseries of the unemployed. Connected with this in a special sense, but also for general reasons, was a great concern with the inherent contradictions of the capitalist system and their unfolding in the course of its development. The nature of capitalist crisis was more intensely discussed, and on a higher theoretical level, than is generally the rule in labor publications, encompassing as it did the most recent interpretations of Marxist economic theory and its application to the prevailing conditions. The various articles devoted to this subject make their perusal highly rewarding even today, since they have lost neither their actuality nor their validity.

In political terms, the rising tide of fascism, and thus the certainty of a new world war, occupied most of the space in *Council Correspondence*—not only with regard to the European scene but also with respect to its interconnections with Asia and the United States. From its earliest beginnings, German "National-Socialism" was recognized as preparation for a war to redivide economic power on a worldwide scale favoring German capitalism. The reactions to Fascist imperialism were considered as being equally determined by competitive capitalist interests. Fascism and war were seen as directed against the international working class, for both attempted to solve the crisis by capitalistic means in order to sustain the capitalist system as such.

The anti-Fascist civil war in Spain, which was immediately a proving ground for World War II, found the council Communists quite naturally—despite their Marxist orientation—on the side of the anarcho-syndicalists, even though circumstances compelled the latter to sacrifice their own principles to the protracted struggle against the common Fascist enemy. The essays devoted to the civil war were of a critical nature and for that reason possessed a high degree of objectivity, which made the failure of anti-fascism—as a

mere political movement—more explicit. Not only were the political-military struggles, foreign interventions, and frictions within the anti-Fascist camp adequately dealt with, but even more attention was given to the short-lived collectivization of industry and agriculture in the anarchist-dominated centers of revolutionary Spain.

Insofar as the problem of the collective economy has been dealt with at all in nineteenth-century Socialist literature, it was in terms of the nationalization of productive resources and government control of production and distribution. Only with the Russian Revolution did this problem assume actual importance, even though the socioeconomic conditions in Russia allowed for no more than a state-controlled economy that retained all the essential economic categories of capital production. This system may best be described as state capitalism. In spite of its differences from the capitalism of old, it was, as far as the working class was concerned, merely another system of capitalist exploitation. The council movement did not recognize its planned economy as either a Socialist economy or a transition to such an economy, and opposed it not merely by denunciation but by developing its own concept of a Socialist society as a free association of producers in full command of all decisioning power connected with the production and distribution process.

The organization of socialism was, then, a recurrent theme in *Council Correspondence* and *Living Marxism*, for the questions it raised could be answered neither by the localized collectivization of economically backward Spain nor by the centralized government planning in equally economically backward Russia. Quite generally, however, Russia's state capitalism was either bewailed or celebrated as the realization of socialism—or, at any rate, as the road leading to it—and this illusion, though aiding Russian state interests, was detrimental to the international labor movement. It was the function of council communism, through its publications, to aid in the destruction of this illusion. There was no longer an urgent need to oppose social democracy. It had already, through its own practices, demonstrated its non-Socialist character and was now in the process of shedding its Socialist ideology as well. This, however, gave the no less counterrevolutionary activities of international bolshevism an unwarranted nimbus. Much space was, therefore, given to analyses of both the theory and practice of bolshevism, going back to its earliest critics, such as Rosa Luxemburg, and bringing this criticism forward by following the history of bolshevism down to World War II. This criticism was all-inclusive, philosophical, political, economical, and organizational, and expressed at an early date what became, only much later, a more widely accepted recognition of the true nature of bolshevism.

Criticism of the old labor movement, whether reformist or revolutionary in its tactics, did not exhaust the repertoire of *Council Correspondence*. Many of its articles and essays dealt with issues of a scholarly nature of more general interest, ranging from problems of psychology, sociology, and literature to such items as geopolitics, nationalism, and imperialism. Quite a number of these essays have been steadily reprinted by other publications and have served different authors as material for their own productions. Yet, for some years after World War II, the ideas propounded in the publications of council Communism seemed to be totally lost. Since then, however, a new interest in workers' councils has brought into being a great international library devoted to the subject and its history. This new interest was undoubtedly fostered by the institutionalization of workers' councils, shop stewards, and workers' committees in almost all the west-European nations, by the rather emasculated workers' councils in the Yugoslav "market socialism," and, last but not least, by their emergence as revolutionary organizations in the recent social upheavals in "Communist" Poland and Hungary. In view of this situation, this reprint of *International Council Correspondence* and its successors is not only of historical interest but may, in a small way, throw some light on the potentialities of a future labor movement.

—Paul Mattick
Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1969

NOTE

1. *Radical Periodicals in America, 1890-1950,* published by Yale University Library, 1964, states erroneously that council Communists "never affiliated with any major party," and that the "great majority of its members were former members of the *German Sozialistische Arbeiter-Partei.*" However, council communism was the program of the first west-European Communist parties before they were changed into parties of the Leninist type to fit them into the Third International. As regards the American group, none of its members had belonged to the *Sozialistische Arbeiter-Partei,* which held a position midway between social democracy and Bolshevism. The few Germans in the American group came from the German council movement. The large majority were native workers, and those with a political background came either from the Industrial Workers of the World or from the left wing of the Proletarian party—the most "American" of the three Socialist groups that had vied for Russian acceptance as the "official" Communist party.

COUNCIL CORRESPONDENCE

ENGLISH EDITION

For Theory and Discussion

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UNITED WORKER'S PARTY