

ARCHIVE

PANNEKOEK ON ORGANISATION

Introduced by John Holloway

Anton Pannekoek (1873-1960), often regarded simply as an “Ultra-left” opponent of Lenin, was one of the leading theorists of the Council Communist movement in the late 1920s and the 1930s. The article reprinted here was first published under the pseudonym J. Harper in the theoretical journal of the American Council Communists, *Living Marxism*, in 1938.

The Council Communists rejected the Party as a form of working class organisation. Many of them had been members of the German Communist Workers Party (KAPD) which had broken with the Third International as early as its Third Congress in 1921. Rejecting therefore not only Stalinism but Leninism as well, the conclusions they drew from the Russian experience were far more radical than those drawn by the Trotskyists who left the “orthodox” fold some years later. In particular, they linked the authoritarian, bureaucratic nature of post-revolutionary Russia with the authoritarian nature of the vanguard party. Indeed, the fault lay not only in Lenin’s concept of the party but in the party itself as a form of organisation. The product of the early period of the working class movement, the party was based on the assumption of the immaturity of the working class, on the assumption that the working class needed leaders to overthrow the bourgeoisie on its behalf. The concept of the party was indissociably bound up with a view of the revolution as the conquest or seizure of political power by the party, followed by a reorganisation of social relations. In the view of the Council Communists, the term “revolutionary party” was self-contradictory, because socialist revolution could only mean the process of transformation of social relations by the working class itself, whereas the party excluded the working class by assuming its immaturity. To the left “party communists”, Pannekoek replied:

“Those who dream of a revolutionary party have only learnt a half, limited lesson from developments up to now. Because the workers’

parties, the Socialist Parties and the Communist Parties, have become organs of bourgeois domination for the maintenance of exploitation, they merely draw the conclusion that they must do it better. They do not see that behind the failure of those parties lies a much deeper conflict, the conflict between the self-liberation of the whole class by its own strength and the smothering of the revolution by a new rule friendly to the workers" (Pannekoek, "Partei und Arbeiterklasse", *Ratekorrespondenz*, 1963).

Since socialism meant the self-emancipation of the working class, it could only be achieved through forms of organisation developed by the mature working class in struggle. These new forms of struggle were already appearing (the "New Workers' Movement" as Pannekoek referred to it in *Capital and Class* No. 1) and found their most developed expression in the councils or soviets which arose in Russia in 1905 and 1917. In the article reprinted here, Pannekoek contrasts councils with the bourgeois forms of parliamentary democracy; elsewhere, (*Bolshevismus und Demokratie*, 1919), he summed up the contrast beautifully by remarking that the councils were "founded not on persons but on labour". The point about councils, then, was not that they provided an organisational blueprint—the whole argument of the Council Communists was precisely that there could be no ahistorical blueprint—but that they expressed a principle, the principle of autonomous class organisation. The revolution could only be a long process of developing the class organisation of the proletariat:

"The idea of workers' councils is not a programme for practical implementation—tomorrow or in a few years' time—but a general guideline for the long and hard struggle for freedom which still lies ahead of the working class" (Pannekoek, *Über Arbeiterrate*, 1952).

The Council Communists made little direct political impact and their "working groups" were never very large although they continued in existence for many years in various countries. Whatever their immediate political impact, however, their work remains very relevant for socialists today. Arguably, the upsurge of socialist activity in the last ten years has shown the increasing irrelevance of party organisation for the practice of the working class. Rather than cling in a-historical loyalty to the forms of organisation thrown up by the struggles of our ancestors, rather than allow all issues to be defined in terms of a supposedly exclusive opposition between revolutionary party and revisionist party, it is perhaps necessary to re-examine the concept of the party in the context of the historical development of class struggle, to remember that "party" and "organisation" are far from being synonymous. Moreover, the work of the Council Communists makes clear that the question of organisation is indissociable from the historical development of bourgeois political forms, from the concept of the revolution (as process or event), the development of "pre-figurative" forms of working class action, the analysis of Eastern Europe, the question of democracy—from all the issues that are coming to dominate CSE Conferences although they have as yet found little room in

Capital and Class. Although included here in the Archive section, let us hope that Pannekoek can stimulate more debate on strategy.

It is perhaps appropriate to close this introduction with a reminder from the chief moving spirit of "Living Marxism"—Paul Mattick:

"By itself, the workers' self-initiative and self-organisation offers no guarantee for their emancipation. It has to be realised and maintained through the abolition of the capital-labour relationship in production, through a council system, which destroys the social class divisions and prevents the rise of new ones based on the control of production and distribution by the national state. However difficult this may prove to be, the history of the existing state-capitalist systems leaves no doubt that this is the only way to a socialist society." (*Anti-Bolshevik Communism*, 1978, p. xi).

GENERAL REMARKS ON THE QUESTION OF ORGANISATION

Organisation is the chief principle in the working class fight for emancipation. Hence the forms of this organisation constitute the most important problem in the practice of the working class movement. It is clear that these forms depend on the conditions of society and the aims of the fight. They cannot be invention of theory, but have to be built up, spontaneously, by the working class itself, guided by its immediate necessities.

With expanding capitalism the workers first built their trade unions. The isolated worker was powerless against the capitalist; so he had to unite with his fellows in bargaining and fighting over the price of his labour power and the hours of labour. Capitalists and workers have opposite interests in capitalistic production; their class struggle is over the partition of the total product between them. In normal capitalism the share of the workers is the value of their labour power, i.e., what is necessary to sustain and to restore continually their capacities to work. The remaining part of the product is the surplus value, the share of the capitalist class. The capitalists, in order to increase their profit, try to lower wages and increase the hours of labour. Where the workers were powerless wages were depressed below the existence minimum; the hours of labour were lengthened until the bodily and mental health of the working class deteriorated so as to endanger the future of society. The formation of unions and of laws regulating working conditions—features rising out of the bitter fight of workers for their very life conditions—were necessary to restore normal conditions of work in capitalism. The capitalist class itself recognises that trade unions are necessary to direct the revolt of the workers into regular channels to prevent them from breaking out in sudden explosions.

Similarly, political organisations have grown up, though not everywhere in exactly the same way, because the political conditions are different in different countries. In America, where a population of farmers, artisans and merchants free from feudal bonds could expand over a continent with endless possibilities, conquering the natural resources, the workers did not feel themselves a separate class. They were imbued, as

were the whole of the people, with the middle-class spirit of individual and collective fight for personal welfare, and the conditions made it possible to succeed to a certain extent. Except at rare historic moments or among recent immigrant groups, no necessity was felt for a separate working class party. In the European countries, on the other hand, the workers were dragged into the political struggle by the fight of the rising bourgeoisie against feudalism. They soon had to form their working class parties and, together with part of the middle class had to fight for political rights, for the right to form unions, for free press and speech, for universal suffrage, for democratic institutions. A political party needs general principles for its propaganda; for its fight with other parties it wants a theory having definite views about the future of society. The working class of Europe, in which communistic ideas had already developed, found its theory in the scientific work of Marx and Engels, explaining the development of society through capitalism towards communism by means of the class struggle. This theory was accepted in the programmes of the Social-Democratic parties of most European countries; in England, the Labour Party formed by the trade unions, professed analogous but more vague ideas about a kind of socialist commonwealth as the aim of the workers.

In their programmes and propaganda the proletarian revolution was the final result of the class struggle; the victory of the working class over its oppressors was to be the beginning of a communistic or socialist system of production. But so long as capitalism lasted the practical fight had to centre on immediate needs and the preservation of standards in capitalism. Under parliamentary government parliament is the battlefield where the interests of the different classes of society meet; big and small capitalists, land owners, farmers, artisans, merchants, industrialists, workers, all have their special interests which are defended by their spokesmen in parliament, all participate in the struggle for power and for their part in the total product. The workers have to take part in this struggle. Socialist or labour parties have the special task of fighting by political means for the immediate needs and interests of the workers within capitalism. In this way they get the votes of the workers and grow in political influence.

2

With the modern development of capitalism conditions have changed. The small workshops have been superseded by large factories and plants with thousands and tens of thousands of workers. With this growth of capitalism and of the working class its organisations also had to expand. From local groups the trade unions grew to big national federations with hundreds of thousands of members. They had to collect large funds for support in big strikes, and still larger ones for social insurance. A large staff of managers, administrators, presidents, secretaries, editors of their papers, an entire bureaucracy of organisation leaders developed. They had to haggle and bargain with the bosses; they became the specialists acquainted with methods and circumstances. Eventually they became the real leaders, the masters of the organisations, masters of the money as well as of the press, against the members, who lost much of their power. This development of the organisations of the workers into instruments of

power over them has many examples in history; when organisations grow too large the masses lose control of them.

The same change takes place in the political organisations, when from small propaganda groups they grow into big political parties. The parliamentary representatives are the leading politicians of the party. They have to do the real fighting in the representative bodies, they are the specialists in that field, they make up the editorial, propaganda and executive personnel; their influence determines the politics and tactical line of the party. The members may do the voting, assist in propaganda and pay their dues; they may send delegates to debate at party congresses, but their power is nominal and illusionary. The character of the organisation resembles that of the other political parties—of organisations of politicians who try to win votes for their slogans and power for themselves. Once a socialist party has a large number of delegates in parliament it makes alliances with others against reactionary parties to form a working majority. Soon socialists become ministers, state officials, mayors and aldermen. Of course, in this position they cannot act as delegates of the working class, governing for the workers against the capitalist class. The real political power and even the parliamentary majority remains in the hands of the capitalist class. Socialist ministers have to represent the interests of the present capitalist society, i.e., of the capitalist class. They can attempt to initiate measures for the immediate interests of the workers and try to induce the capitalist parties to acquiesce. They become middlemen—mediators—pleading with the capitalist class to consent to small reforms in the interests of the workers, and then try to convince the workers that these are important reforms which they should accept. And then the Socialist Party, as an instrument in the hands of these leaders, has to support them and also, instead of calling upon the workers to fight for their interests, to pacify them and deflect them from the class struggle.

Indeed, fighting conditions have grown worse for the workers. With their capital the power of the capitalist class has increased enormously. The concentration of capital in the hands of some few captains of finance and industry, the coalition of the bosses themselves, confronts the trade unions with a much stronger and often nearly unassailable power. The fierce competition of the capitalists of all countries over markets, raw materials and world power, the necessity of using increasing parts of the surplus value for this competition, for armaments and warfare; the falling of the profit rate compel the capitalists to increase the rate of exploitation, i.e. to lower the working conditions for the workers. Thus the trade unions meet increasing resistance, the old methods of struggle grow useless. In their bargaining with the bosses the leaders of the organisations have less success; because they know the power of the capitalists, and because they themselves do not want to fight—since in such fights the funds and the whole existence of the organisations might be lost—they must accept what the bosses offer. So their chief task is to assuage the discontent of the workers, and to defend the proposals of the bosses as important gains. Here also the leaders of the workers' organisations become mediators between the opposing classes. And when the workers do not accept the conditions and strike, the leaders either must oppose them or allow a sham fight, to be broken off as soon as possible.

The fight itself, however, cannot be stopped or minimised; the class antagonism and the depressing forces of capitalism are increasing, so that the class struggle must go on, the workers must fight. Time and again they break loose spontaneously without asking the unions and often against their decisions. Sometimes the union leaders succeed in regaining control of these actions. This means that the fight will be gradually smothered in some new arrangement between the capitalists and labour leaders. This does not mean that without this interference such wildcat strikes will be won. They are too restricted to the directly interested groups. Only indirectly the fear of such explosions tends to foster caution by the capitalists. But these strikes prove that the class fight between capital and labour cannot cease, and that when the old forms are not practicable any more, the workers spontaneously try out and develop new forms of action. In these actions revolt against capital is also revolt against the old organisational forms.

3

The aim and task of the working class is the abolition of capitalism. Capitalism in its highest development, with its ever deeper economic crises, its imperialism, its armaments, its world wars, threatens the workers with misery and destruction. The proletarian class fight, the resistance and revolt against these conditions, must go on till capitalist domination is overthrown and capitalism is destroyed.

Capitalism means that the productive apparatus is in the hands of the Capitalists because they are the masters of the means of production, and hence of the products, they can seize the surplus value and exploit the working class. Only when the working class itself is master of the means of production does exploitation cease. Then the workers entirely control their conditions of life. The production of everything necessary for life is the common task of the community of workers, which is then the community of mankind. This production is a collective process. First each factory, each large plant is a collective of workers, combining their efforts in an organised way. Moreover, the totality of world production is a collective process; all the separate factories have to be combined into a totality of production. Hence, when the working class takes possession of the means of production, it has at the same time to create an organisation of production.

There are many who think of the proletarian revolution in terms of the former revolutions of the middle class, as a series of consecutive phases: first, conquest of government and installment of a new government, then expropriation of the capitalist class by law, and then a new organisation of the process of production. But such events could lead only to some kind of state capitalism. As the proletariat rises to dominance it develops simultaneously its own organisation and the forms of the new economic order. These two developments are inseparable and form the process of social revolution. Working class organisation into a strong unity capable of united mass actions already means revolution, because capitalism can rule only unorganised individuals. When these organised masses

stand up in mass fights and revolutionary actions, and the existing powers are paralysed and disintegrated, then, simultaneously, the leading and regulating functions of former governments fall to the workers' organisations. And the immediate task is to carry on production, to continue the basic process of social life. Since the revolutionary class fight against the bourgeoisie and its organs is inseparable from the seizure of the productive apparatus by the workers and its application to production, the same organisation that unites the class for its fight also acts as the organisation of the new productive process.

It is clear that the organisation forms of trade union and political party, inherited from the period of expanding capitalism, are useless here. They developed into instruments in the hands of leaders unable and unwilling to engage in revolutionary fight. Leaders cannot make revolutions: labour leaders abhor a proletarian revolution. For the revolutionary fight the workers need new forms of organisation in which they keep the powers of action in their own hands. It is not necessary to try to construct or to imagine these new forms; they can originate only in the practical fight of the workers themselves. They have already originated there; we have only to look into practice to find its beginnings everywhere where the workers are rebelling against the old powers.

In a wildcat strike the workers decide all matters themselves through regular meetings. They choose strike committees as central bodies, but the members of these committees can be recalled and replaced at any moment. If the strike extends over a large number of shops, they achieve unity of action by larger committees consisting of delegates of all the separate shops. Such committees are not bodies to make decisions according to their own opinion, and over the workers; they are simply messengers, communicating the opinions and wishes of the groups they represent, and conversely, bringing to the shopmeetings, for discussion and decision, the opinion and arguments of the other groups. They cannot play the roles of leaders, because they can be momentarily replaced by others. The workers themselves must choose their way, decide their actions; they keep the entire action, with all its difficulties, its risks, its responsibilities, in their own hands. And when the strike is over the committees disappear.

The only example of a modern industrial working class as the moving force of a political revolution were the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917. Here the workers of each factory chose delegates, and the delegates of all the factories together formed the "soviet", the council where the political situation and necessary actions were discussed. Here the opinions of the factories were collected, their desires harmonised, their decisions formulated. But the councils, though a strong directing influence for revolutionary education through action, were not commanding bodies. Sometimes a whole council was arrested and reorganised with new delegates; at times, when the authorities were paralysed by a general strike, the soviets acted as a local government, and delegates of free professions joined them to represent their field of work. Here we have the organisation of the workers in revolutionary action, though of course only imperfectly, groping and trying for new methods. This is possible only when all the workers with all their forces participate in the action, when their very exis-

tence is at stake, when they actually take part in the decisions and are entirely devoted to the revolutionary fight.

After the revolution this council organisation disappeared. The proletarian centres of big industry were small islands in an ocean of primitive agricultural society where capitalistic development had not yet begun. The task of initiating capitalism fell to the Communist party. Simultaneously, political power centred in its hands and the soviets were reduced to subordinate organs with only nominal powers.

The old forms of organisation, the trade union and political party and the new form of councils (soviets), belonging to different phases in the development of society and have different functions. The first has to secure the position of the working class among the other classes within capitalism and belongs to the period of expanding capitalism. The latter has to conquer complete dominance for the workers, to destroy capitalism and its class divisions, and belongs to the period of declining capitalism. In a rising and prosperous capitalism council organisation is impossible because the workers are entirely occupied in ameliorating their conditions of life, which is possible at that time through trade unions and political action. In a decaying crisis-ridden capitalism these are useless and faith in them can only hamper the increase of self action by the masses. In such times of heavy tension and growing revolt against misery, when strike movements spread over whole countries and strike at the roots of capitalist power, or when following wars or political catastrophes the government authority crumbles and the masses act, the old organisational forms fail against the new forms of self-activity of the masses.

4

Spokesmen of socialist or communist parties often admit that, in revolution, organs of self-action by the masses are useful in destroying the old domination; but then they say these have to yield to parliamentary democracy in order to organise the new society. Let us compare the basic principles of both forms of political organisation of society.

Original democracy in small towns and districts was exercised by the assembly of all the citizens. With the big population of modern towns and countries this is impossible. The people can express their will only by choosing delegates to some central body that represents them all. The delegates for parliamentary bodies are free to act, to decide, to vote, to govern after their own opinion; by "honour and conscience" as it is often called in solemn terms.

The council delegates, however, are bound by mandate; they are sent simply to express the opinions of the workers' groups who sent them. They may be called back and replaced at any moment. Thus the workers who gave them the mandate keep the power in their own hands.

On the other hand, members of parliament are chosen for a fixed number of years; only at the polls are the citizens masters—on this one day when they choose their delegates. Once this day has passed, their power has gone and the delegates are independent, free to act for a term of years according to their own "conscience", restricted only by the

knowledge that after this period they have to face the voters anew; but then they count on catching their votes in a noisy election campaign, bombing the confused voters with slogans and demagogic phrases. Thus not the voters but the parliamentarians are the real masters who decide politics. And the voters do not even send persons of their own choice as delegates; they are presented to them by the political parties. And then, if we suppose that people could select and send persons of their own choice, these persons would not form the government; in parliamentary democracy the legislative and the executive powers are separated. The real government dominating the people is formed by a bureaucracy of officials so far removed from the people's vote as to be practically independent. That is how it is possible that capitalistic dominance is maintained through general suffrage and parliamentary democracy. This is why in capitalistic countries, where the majority of the people belongs to the working class, this democracy cannot lead to a conquest of political power. For the working class parliamentary democracy is a sham democracy, whereas council representation is real democracy: the direct rule of the workers over their own affairs.

Parliamentary democracy is the political form in which the different important interests in a capitalist society exert their influence upon government. The delegates represent certain classes: farmers, merchants, industrialists, workers; but they do not represent the common will; they are an assembly of individuals, capitalists, workers, shopkeepers, by chance living at the same place, having partly opposing interests.

Council delegates, on the other hand, are sent out by a homogeneous group to express its common will. Councils are not only made up of workers, having common class interests; they are a natural group, working together as the personnel of one factory or section of a large plant, and are in close daily contact with each other, having the same adversary, having to decide their common actions as fellow workers in which they have to act in united fashion; not only on the questions of strike and fight, but also in the new organisation of production. Council representation is not founded upon the meaningless grouping of adjacent villages or districts, but upon the natural grouping of workers in the process of production, the real basis of society.

However, councils must not be confused with the so-called corporative representation which is propagated in fascist countries. This is a representation of the different professions or trades (masters and workers combined), considered as fixed constituents of society. This form belongs to a medieval society with fixed classes and guilds, and in its tendency to petrify interest groups it is even worse than parliamentarism, where new groups and new interests, rising up in the development of capitalism soon find their expression in parliament and government.

Council representation is entirely different because it is the representation of a fighting revolutionary class. It represents working class interests only, and prevents capitalist delegates and capitalist interests from participation. It denies the right of existence to the capitalist class in society and tries to eliminate them as capitalists by taking the means of production away from them. When in the progress of revolution the workers must

take up the functions of organising society the same council organisation is their instrument. This means that the workers' councils then are the organs of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This dictatorship of the proletariat is not a shrewdly devised voting system artificially excluding capitalists and middle class members from the polls. It is the exercise of power in society by the natural organs of the workers, building up the productive apparatus as the basis of society. In these organs of the workers, consisting of delegates of their various branches in the process of production, there is no place for robbers or exploiters standing outside productive work. Thus the dictatorship of the working class is at the same time the most perfect democracy, the real workers' democracy, excluding the vanishing class of exploiters.

5

The adherents of the old forms of organisation exalt democracy as the only right and just political form, as against dictatorship, an unjust form. Marxism knows nothing of abstract right or justice; it explains the political forms in which mankind expresses its feelings of political right, as consequences of the economic structure of society. By the Marxian theory we can find also the basis of the difference between parliamentary democracy and council organisation. As middle class democracy and proletarian democracy they reflect the different character of these two classes and their economic systems.

Middle class democracy is founded upon a society consisting of a large number of independent small producers. They want a government to take care of their common interests: public security and order, protection of commerce, uniform systems of weight and money, administering of law and justice. All these things are necessary in order that everybody can do his business in his own way. Private business takes the whole attention, forms the life interests of everybody, and those political factors are, though necessary, only secondary and demand only a small part of their attention. The chief content of social life, the basis of existence of society, the production of all the goods necessary for life, is divided up into the private business of the separate citizens, hence it is natural that it takes nearly all their time, and that politics, their collective affair, providing only for auxiliary conditions, is a subordinate matter. Only in middle class revolutionary movements do people take to the streets. But in ordinary times politics are left to a small groups of specialists, politicians, whose life-work consists just of taking care of these general, political conditions of middle class business.

The same holds true for the workers, as long as they think only of their direct interests. In capitalism they work long hours, all their energy is exhausted in the process of exploitation, and but little mental power and fresh thought is left them. Wage earning is the most immediate necessity of life; their political interests, their common interest in safeguarding their interests as wage earners may be important but are still an accessory. So they leave this part of their interests also to specialists, to their party politicians and their trade union leaders. By voting as citizens or members

the workers may give some general directions, just as middle class voters may influence their politicians, but only partially, because their chief attention must remain concentrated upon their own work.

Proletarian democracy, under communism, depends upon just the opposite economic conditions. It is founded not on private but on collective production. Production of the life necessities is no longer a personal business, but a collective affair. The collective affairs, formerly called political affairs, are no longer secondary, but the chief object of thought and action for everybody. What was called politics in former society, a domain for specialists, has become the life interest of every worker. It is not the securing of some necessary conditions of production, it is the process and the regulation of production itself. The separation of private and collective affairs and interests has ceased. A separate group or class of specialists taking care of the collective affairs is no longer necessary. Through their council delegates which link them together the producers themselves are managing their own productive work.

The two forms of organisation are not distinguished in that one is founded upon a traditional and ideological basis, and the other on the material productive basis of society. Both are founded upon the material basis of the system of production; one on the declining system of the past, the other on the growing system of the future. Right now we are in the period of transition, the time of big capitalism and the beginnings of the proletarian revolution. In big capitalism the old system of production has already been destroyed in its foundations; the large class of independent producers has disappeared. The main part of production is collective work of large groups of workers; but the control and ownership have remained in a few private hands. This contradictory state is maintained by the strong power factors of the capitalists, especially the state power exerted by the governments. The task of the proletarian revolution is to destroy this state power; its real content is the seizure of the means of production by the workers. The process of revolution is, in an alternation of actions and defeats, the building up of the organisation of the proletarian dictatorship, which at the same time is the dissolution, step by step, of the capitalist state power. Hence it is the process of the replacement of the organisation system of the past by the organisation system of the future.

We are only in the beginnings of this revolution. The century of class fight behind us cannot be considered as such a beginning, only as a pre-arrable. It developed invaluable theoretical knowledge, it found gallant revolutionary words in defiance of the capitalist claim of being a final social system; it awakened the workers from the hopelessness of misery. But its actual fight remained bound within the confines of capitalism, it was action through the medium of leaders and sought only to set easy masters in the place of hard ones. Only a sudden flickering of revolt, such as political or mass strikes breaking out against the will of the politicians, now and then announced the future of self-determined mass action. Every wildcat strike, not taking its leaders and catchwords from the offices of parties and unions, is an indication of this development, and at the same time a small step in its direction. All the existing powers in the proletarian movement, the socialist and communist parties, the trade unions, all the

leaders whose activity is bound to the middle class democracy of the past, denounce these mass actions as anarchistic disturbances. Because their field of vision is limited to their old forms of organisation, they cannot see that the spontaneous actions of the workers bear in them the germs of higher forms of organisation. In fascist countries, where the old middle class democracy has been destroyed, such spontaneous mass actions will be the only form of future proletarian revolt. Their tendency will not be a restoration of the former middle class democracy but an advance in the direction of the proletarian democracy, i.e., the dictatorship of the working class.

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