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The Russian revolution and the strategic role of the soviets in the class struggle

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Regardless of one's opinion on The Russian Revolution and the subsequent development of Russian society, the self-organized workers' councils – the soviets – remain an important breakthrough. For the most part, the discussion of the centenary of the revolution has conveniently steered clear of this subject. Nonetheless, understanding the soviets and its council structure remains central to understanding both how the revolution came about, and what its goals were. “All power to the soviets”, the slogan went, but what power, and what are soviets actually? These are central questions for any future attempts to change the world.

Soviet power – sometimes referred to as council power in English – became one of the most fundamental questions during the Russian Revolution. Subsequently, the subject of organizing through councils, as a democratic counterbalance to parliamentary systems, has become an integrated part of a vast number of intensifying social conflicts.

The structure of soviet councils did not originate in the revolution of 1917, but rather during its predecessor in 1905. The structure was a consequence of prolonged conflicts between the industrialists and workers of Russia. As unions were prohibited, the workers formed councils through which to organize their strikes. These councils were formed at workplaces, where delegates were elected. This organization became a force to be reckoned with for all social classes; with pride, wonder or disgust. As the first large revolutionary experience since The Paris Commune, the two Russian revolutions became valuable lessons for the self-organization of the working classes and oppressed people of revolutionary society.

The Russian revolution was both political and social in its promise. Political, because it completely transformed the political system, replacing the political caste and the parliamentary gamesmanship with direct representation in public councils. Social, because these councils made decisions regarding the prioritization of society's resources, which were not related to previous ownership conditions – instead seizing control of the process of production. At the beginning of the previous century, the first question was poorly developed, as the socialist movement had not developed a formula for political revolution. In other words, it was unclear how the working class was supposed to organize the appropriation of the means of production. One of the best solutions to this came from Rosa Luxemburg, who proposed in her pamphlet on mass strikes, that the political mass strike should be the cornerstone of the revolutionary movement. In it, she clearly demonstrated how a

series of mass strikes and outright general strikes, which had led everything to grind to a halt, preceded the revolution of 1905. It is impossible to understand the development of the soviets, without first understanding the underlying dynamics, and their relation to the strike movement. As such, we must reflect on the accrued experiences of the early twentieth century.

The Russian workers movement

While the workers' movement on one hand consisted of a wide variety of social and political organizations, responsible for education, childcare etc., the political management of society was effectively placed outside the hands of the working class in tsarist Russia. The question of the organizational skills of the working class therefore was not a matter relating to professional union employees or politicians, but rather the organization of more or less spontaneous strikes, distributing shifts on the picket line, distributing food, organizing various needs during the strikes, protecting factories and striking workers, and so on.

It was also the immediate social tasks of the strikes that became the focal point of the earliest attempts at forming workers' councils. With the striking councils, the numerous experiences, which had been building at various places throughout Russia, began merging the leadership of the strikes with the social sectors of the Russian workers' movement. The socialist parties gained support there because of the actual work they got done, both in terms of education and mutual assistance of the workers. Thereby, the soviets assumed the roles both of the coordination of factory committees, but also as soup kitchens, workers' education, food distribution and street security. This did not usually happen as the result of decrees, but through voluntary endorsement from its participants of the council's decisions. Through their influence amongst the working class populace, the soviets became the de facto leading organ in several cities during the revolution of 1905.

Dual power

This circumstance created a series of incidents of dual power. On one hand, the power based on the workers and oppressed people's independent organization of their own lives (the soviets); on the other hand, the absolutist power - later the manufacturers' and landowners' power - which was an expression of the old state power in various disguises.

Until then, dual power had been an unknown phenomenon. As a precondition to its existence, as well as because of it, the soviets developed their own apparatus. This was in stark contrast to the existing state apparatus. In cases where the old state apparatus obeyed the soviets rather than the government, its officials were submitted to the rule of the soviets, elections, recall, pay caps etc. Its power rested on arming the population itself. Its orders were orders of the people, for the people, as opposed to the previous state's rule over its citizens. The power of the soviets could not coexist with the previous state for extended periods; one of them had to defeat the other.

The soviets consisted of representatives from workplaces, which could claim representation proportionate with its number of employees. Mandates could be revoked from time to time, and the meetings were open to the public. This in itself led to a string of new organizational forms, and helped develop existing organizations. In most areas, the soviets developed independently of one another - although with clear internal inspiration from one another - both when it came to the specific shape, and the challenges they were presented with. As such, they were capable of operating politically with far greater precision. This would prove to be a crucial advantage in 1917. The apparatus of the soviets was behind its political leadership, in contrast to the Russian state

apparatus, which was tangled up in countless intrigues internally and against its political class.

During 1917, the soviets had evolved from representing the interests of the workers to a more broad representation including soldiers and – in rural areas – the peasants. The two segments largely represented the same class of people in different situations. Like the development of experiences with council governance in the large strike movements, the soviets of the peasants cannot be separated from the organization of land expropriations and peasant revolts in the countryside, just as the soldiers' is intertwined with mutinies and power struggles in the army. As such, the formation of soviets as leading social and political councils, and the emergence of these as alternative power hubs during 1917, has to be viewed within the context of the enormous social struggles they were embedded in. In this manner, the soviets were both the precondition of the revolutionary movement, as well as the result of it.

The soviet as the product of the class struggle

As the participants in the Russian Revolution are keen to point out, the Russian working class was neither the strongest nor the best organized in 1917. The problems pertaining to organizing and executing mass strikes and soviet power had not been discussed on a broader level within the Russian working class. The logic of the organizational shape of the soviets sprang from the development of the class struggle in one of the most overexploited, repressive countries in the imperialist chain. Since then, it has reemerged in various concrete forms, in a series of revolutionary situations throughout history. The soviet or council structure is not a fetish. It has manifested in political revolutions against the leadership of the former East Bloc, as well as colonial struggles in the Global South, and in revolutionary situations in European countries. The council structure is not the result of dogmatic thinking within revolutionary groupings, but rather a function of the structure's ability to simultaneously fill the need for organization and rebellion, all the while proposing the framework for the organization of a different society. In this manner, the soviets can be viewed as a collective response to the historical challenge presented to the workers movement.

During the German Revolution, if the German SPD had stood behind the council movement power would have rested unequivocally in their hands. The German working class had already laid the foundation for many of the institutions, which would form the backbone of a worker state. What was lacking were the democratic conditions needed to govern such institutions and seize the means of production. One of the major challenges of the organization of the working class remains the fact, that these organizations inherently create an administrative layer, removed from the people organizing. This challenge is embedded into the capitalist way of functioning and the length of the workday. The very management of the working class' economic and political demands, as well as the organization of these, is time consuming. Getting people into unions means going to the workplaces during work hours. But organizing and making demands is not 'work' in the same sense as the physical labor being performed at the workplace, which is subject to an outside desire for profit; a condition affecting most workers. The Paris Commune had already seen the implementation of rules meant to take this into account, such as principles of rotation and limitation of pay. These are important experiences, which have nonetheless provided an inadequate response to an important question: which form of democratic assembly could both take on the old power constellations, and establish a new one? The worker movement's own ways of organizing had become an example of this. Indeed, the institutions of the old society never really die out, until the new has taken its place.

The structure of the soviets turned everything familiar about politics on its head. From being the occupation of a few professionals, it became an activity for all. What had previously been the result of secret agreements and negotiations far from the public eye were now openly discussed. Now

everyone could see the shady dealings, which had divided the world between the victors of the Great War, and the dirty loans that had been given to Russia by the British and French imperialists. The same was true of the exorbitant loans, which Russia had handed out to its own dependent neighbors and allies. Soviet power blossomed precisely because it did not imitate the secret and hidden agendas of the old regime.

The relevance of the soviet

The soviet structure is, due to its political nature, an outlet for class struggle. The existence of organizing councils and assemblies outside the control of the state, leads to continuous clashes with the state. Most recently, we have seen this dynamic unfold in Egypt, Greece, Spain and Syria, among other places. Because of this contradiction, maintaining the function and existence of the soviet becomes a defense of the power of council governance over that of the old state. The general spreading and organization of cooperating councils, based on workplaces, reproduction and localities, are revolutionary steps taken by revolutionary organs. Just as the soviet could not have formed without the spontaneous, social struggles of the working class, it cannot continue to exist without consciously placing itself in the vanguard of the political struggles present for the working classes and the oppressed.

As such, it is crucial for the soviet that it reaches for power over society at the right moment. Where it has shown incapable of doing this, history has dealt the council structure a severe verdict. Even the slightest political concessions have historically been avenged in blood, and the capitalist class is well aware of the significance of the council assembly. In moments of heightened class struggle, there are bound to be winners and losers, leaving little room for compromises. The Finnish social democrats, thinking they could handle the counterrevolution through parliamentary measures, learned this dynamic of class struggle the hard way, when they hesitated in taking power from the corrupt parliament. A quarter of the Finnish proletariat was either killed or handed long prison sentences. This also happened exactly one hundred years ago.

Parties and the soviet

From the beginning, a tension between the parties of the working class and the soviets has been present. For better or worse, people with a sense of structure make parties, people that develop a system, and subsequently seek to implement it. The soviet worked the other way around, as it created its political system through practical activities. The Russian social democrats initially tried to exclude the anarchists from the soviets, and tried to make the soviets adopt the social democratic policy program. Both were examples of party patriotism, and the notion that the interests of the party can replace the articulated interests of the class. Even though this idea was based on an enormous support for a party, it became part of the mold from which the seeds of the counterrevolution grew. This notion is entirely a result of the material conditions of the class struggle, as well as the fact that the political system within a capitalist society helps fuel these sort of ideas. Material conditions, because the parties of the working class are inevitably founded on a different basis than the working class itself; the political system, because it is entirely built around making decisions on behalf of others.

It remains a very real challenge for modern anti-capitalist parties to overcome the contradictions between the democracy that evolves from activities and struggles for rights, and the democratic system these parties exist within. A solution has still not been found to this contradiction, which also revealed itself in the relationship between the strike movements, the occupations of the squares,

local councils and the left in Greece. The question remains whether it is actually possible to overcome this contradiction without ruining the conditions of its emergence – without say ceasing to seek representation in the parliamentary system, or quitting the development of self-governing, democratic organs within the class struggle (and following that, seeking to undermine or overtake them). Awareness of this conflict, and an honest, open confrontation with it, is the first step one must take in order to avoid being caught off guard by it. The building of positions within the workers' movement, e.g. in the food sector, the reproductive sector or the revitalisation of abandoned industry and workplaces, is necessary in order for the council structures to have something to actually structure.

The potential of the soviet

The state of the oppressed is not created from top to bottom. Pressured by the social and economic conditions, the working class can only establish an alternative power when it has already established the foundations for another society in advance. As such, we are not talking about a 'state' as conventionally defined, but rather the conscious organization of life by the people themselves. In that sense, this type of state only appropriates the amount of power necessary to fight its historical opponents. The promise of the soviet was that of a state based on the power of the people, not using force to organize everyday life, but rather to contain the old order. In this manner, the soviet structure overcame many of the fruitless debates that had existed between anarchists and Marxists within the worker's movement. The soviet formed a bridge between the idea of overtaking the old state and making it wither away, and the opposing view that an alternative power was not required before the state could die.

The strike remains the strongest weapon of the working class, while the capitalist views it as barren and pointless; the end of labor and creativity. Strikes have never been passive, shy affairs though, but rather bursts of withheld creative energy. When it overcomes its aim of halting production, the very circumstances pose the question of how to organize life without wage labor.

The soviet owns the creative energy of the strike. It is the political expression of an economic system where the producer, not the owner is in charge. That the soviet system grew out of strikes is thus best understood as a parallel to – and expression of – the development of the class struggle. The abolition of the profit logic of the capitalist market correlates with the abolition of the anonymous logic of capitalist democracy. Just as the striking worker is transformed from consumer of offered labor to producer of necessary products, so is the participant of the soviet transformed – from consumer of the democratic system, to the active producer of it.

Since 1905, councils and soviets have arisen within all situations of heightened class struggle. The council has proved to be a historical fact similar to the historical facts of the bourgeois revolutions (the separation of powers, parliamentarism etc.). Therefore, the subject of soviets and power cannot be avoided in this debate – nor should it. For decades, there has been a deafening silence from the left wing, when it came to the question of power, counter-power and the organization of society. Very little has been said, which did not fit the established narratives.

Obviously, the Russian soviets of 100 years ago should not be copied in precise detail. There would not be any reason for doing this, as our possibilities of participation and insight are much better today – not least in the reproductive field. Nonetheless, we can assume, with some historical confidence that the class struggles of the future will also result in the oppressed building democratic organs of self-management in sharpened periods. The principles of participation, revocability, rotation, transparency and openness must remain the pillars of such formations. These organizations

will in every aspect display the parliamentary system as an example of an immature, reactionary system, just as the Danish parliament cannot exactly look back with pride on the days when it was an advisory assembly to the Danish king.

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P.S.

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