

The Comintern's unknown decision on workers' governments

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English-language discussion of the Communist International's 1922 call for workers' governments has been based on a preliminary draft that was significantly altered before its adoption. Here, probably for the first time in English, is the amended text that the congress actually adopted.

The call for a workers' government emerged from German workers' struggles in 1920 as a way of posing the need for workers' power in a context where no alternative structure of revolutionary councils, or soviets, yet existed.

When a right-wing coup in March 1920 was countered by an insurrectionary general strike of German workers, the head of the Social Democratic unions, Carl Legien, proposed to resolve the crisis through creation of a government of workers' parties and trade unions.

The German Communist Party responded that it would support such a government if it took effective measures to disarm the counterrevolution and defend working people. This stand, which provoked great controversy in the world revolutionary movement, was finally endorsed by the Communist International (Comintern) in December 1921 – although only for Germany. [\[1\]](#)

Discussion in the Comintern over the next year led to general agreement that the concept of “workers' government” should be used. But when the Fourth Congress opened in November 1922, its leaders were using the term in three different ways, which can be summarized by the words *pseudonym*, *transition*, and *illusion*.

- **Pseudonym:** The International's president, Gregory Zinoviev, as well as ultra-left forces in Germany (led by Ruth Fischer), Italy (led by Amadeo Bordiga) and other countries, held that the term “workers' government” referred only to a regime of the type established by the Russian revolution of October 1917, that is, a dictatorship of the proletariat resting on revolutionary workers' councils. This was the approach taken in the first two drafts of the Fourth Congress resolution on this question. However, delegates of the German party majority convinced the congress to abandon this approach mid-way through its proceedings, and it does not appear in the third draft.

- **Transition:** This concept, advocated by the German Communist Party's majority leadership and Comintern leader Karl Radek, saw the “workers' government” demand as a component of a transitional program, that is, a set of demands that “undermine the power of the bourgeoisie, organize the proletariat, and mark out stages in the struggle for its dictatorship” [\[2\]](#). Such a government, while possibly constituted by parliamentary means, would rest on the workers' mass movement and take measures to dismantle the bourgeois state. This transitional concept is presented in the third draft of the Fourth Congress resolution.

- **Illusion:** This concept, advanced mainly by Zinoviev, referred to parliamentary-based governments formed by workers' parties but carrying out a basically capitalist agenda. Zinoviev predicted that such a "liberal workers' government" was likely to be formed by the Labour Party in Britain. (The Labour Party was indeed elected to office in 1924.) Such a regime, Zinoviev told the congress said, "could be the jumping-off point for revolutionising the country," could take many steps "objectively directed against the bourgeois state," and "can finish in the hands of the left wing." [3] Zinoviev's view was open to the charge that his "workers' government" was a euphemism for a form of bourgeois rule. The changes made in the fourth and final draft of the Fourth Congress resolution did not eliminate Zinoviev's concept, but renamed it as a "illusory workers' government" and strengthened the argument against such a misinterpretation.

Existing English translations [4] are based on a Russian text published in 1933 [5]. This version uses the third draft of the Fourth Congress theses and does not include the amendments incorporated into the fourth draft. The unamended third draft has served as the basis for criticisms by some present-day Marxists that the Fourth Congress decision on workers' governments muddled the distinction between workers' and bourgeois rule. [6]

The final text of the resolution makes clear that such criticisms are directed at weaknesses that congress delegates themselves recognized and sought to correct.

The text that follows is a translation of the fourth and final draft from the German edition of the Fourth Congress proceedings. It appears as Point 11 of the congress "Theses on Comintern Tactics." [7] All amendments added to the third draft are in italics; deletions from it are indicated in footnotes.

There exists another version of the final draft, published in the German edition of congress resolutions. Differences between these two versions are footnoted in the text that follows.

The discrepancies between the various versions indicate that the workers' government question was far from settled in the Communist International of 1922. So it remains today. Let us hope that increased availability of source materials will help us to better understand the applicability of this concept.

The translation that follows is taken from *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International*, 1922, to be published in November 2011 by Historical Materialism Book Series. Copyright © 2011 by John Riddell.

The workers' government

[Point 11 in "On the Tactics of the Comintern," adopted by the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922]

As a general propagandistic slogan, the workers' government (or workers' and peasants' government) can be used almost everywhere. As an immediate political slogan, however, the workers' government is most important in countries where bourgeois society is particularly unstable, where the relationship of forces between the workers' parties and the bourgeoisie places the question of government on the agenda as a practical problem requiring immediate solution. In these countries, the slogan of the workers' government flows unavoidably from the entire united-front tactic.

The parties of the Second International attempt to 'rescue' the situation in these countries by

advocating and achieving a coalition of the Social Democrats with bourgeois forces. Recently, some parties of the Second International (for example, in Germany) have attempted to reject open participation in such a coalition government while carrying it out in disguised form. This is simply an attempt to appease the indignant masses, a subtle betrayal of the working masses.

Instead of a bourgeois-Social-Democratic coalition, whether open or disguised, Communists propose the united front of all workers and a coalition of all workers' parties, in both the economic and political arena, to struggle against the power of the bourgeoisie and ultimately to overthrow it. Through united struggle of all workers against the bourgeoisie, the entire state apparatus can pass over into the hands of the workers' government, thus strengthening the power of the working class.

The most basic tasks of a workers' government must consist of arming the proletariat, disarming the bourgeois counter-revolutionary organisations, introducing [workers'] control of production, shifting the main burden of taxation to the shoulders of the rich, and breaking the resistance of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie.

Such a workers' government is possible only if it is born from the struggles of the masses themselves and is supported by militant workers' organisations created by the most oppressed layers of the working masses. Even a workers' government that arises from a purely parliamentary combination, that is, one that is purely parliamentary in origin, can provide the occasion for a revival of the revolutionary workers' movement.

Obviously, the birth and continued existence of a genuine workers' government, one that pursues revolutionary policies, must result in a bitter struggle with the bourgeoisie, and possibly a civil war. Even an attempt by the proletariat to form such a workers' government will encounter from the outset most determined resistance from the bourgeoisie. The slogan of the workers' government thus has the potential of uniting the proletariat and unleashing revolutionary struggle.

Under certain circumstances, Communists must state their readiness to form a workers' government with non-Communist workers' parties and workers' organisations. However, they should do so only if there are guarantees that the workers' government will carry out a genuine struggle against the bourgeoisie along the lines described above. There are obvious conditions for the participation by Communists in such a government, including:

1. Participation in a workers' government can take place only with the agreement of the Communist International.

2. Communist participants in such a government must be subject to the strictest supervision of their party.

3. The Communists participating in this workers' government must be in very close contact with the revolutionary organisations of the masses.

4. The Communist party must unconditionally maintain its own public identity and complete independence in agitation.

For all its great advantages, the slogan of a workers' government also has its dangers, as does the whole united-front tactic. To head off these dangers,[1] the Communist parties must keep in mind that although every bourgeois government is also a capitalist government, not every workers' government is truly proletarian, that is, a revolutionary instrument of proletarian power.

The Communist International must consider the following possibilities.

I. Illusory workers' governments

1. A liberal workers' government, such as existed in Australia and may exist in Britain in the foreseeable future.
2. A Social-Democratic workers' government (Germany).

II. Genuine workers' governments

3. Government of workers and the poorer peasants. Such a possibility exists in the Balkans, Czechoslovakia, and so on.
4. A workers' government with Communist participation.[2]
5. A genuinely proletarian workers' government, which, in its pure form, can be embodied only in the Communist party.

Communists stand ready to march with the workers who have not yet recognised the necessity of a dictatorship of the proletariat. Communists are also ready, under certain conditions and with certain guarantees, to support a workers' government that is not purely Communist, indeed, even a merely illusory workers' government – of course, only to the degree that it defends the workers' interests.

However, the Communists state just as plainly to the working class that, without a revolutionary struggle against the bourgeoisie, a true workers' government can neither be achieved nor maintained. The only type of government that can be considered a genuine workers' government is one that is determined to take up a resolute struggle at least to achieve the workers' most important immediate demands against the bourgeoisie. That is the only type of workers' government in which Communists can participate.

The first two types, the illusory workers' governments (liberal and Social-Democratic), are not revolutionary governments but can, under certain circumstances, speed up the decomposition of bourgeois power.

The next two types of workers' government (workers' and peasants' government; Social-Democratic-Communist government) do not yet signify the dictatorship of the proletariat and are not even a historically inevitable transitional stage to this dictatorship. Rather, wherever they come into being, they are an important starting point for a struggle for this dictatorship.

Only the genuine workers' government consisting of Communists (#5), represents the fully achieved dictatorship of the proletariat.[3]

Footnotes

1. The third draft includes, at this point, the words, "and to combat illusions that the stage of 'democratic coalition' is inevitable".
2. The third draft text here reads: "A social-democratic/Communist coalition government."
3. In place of the preceding italicized text, the unamended third draft has the following:

Communists are also prepared to work alongside those workers who have not yet recognised the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Accordingly Communists are also ready, in certain conditions and with certain guarantees, to support a non-Communist workers' government.

However, the Communists will still openly declare to the masses that the workers' government can be neither won nor maintained without a revolutionary struggle against the bourgeoisie.

The first two types of workers' governments (the workers' and peasants' and the social-democratic/Communist governments) fall short of representing the dictatorship of the proletariat, but are still an important starting point for the winning of this dictatorship. The complete dictatorship of the proletariat can only be a genuine workers' government (type 5) consisting of Communists. (Translation from Adler 1980, p. 399)

The alternate version published in the collection of congress resolutions lacks the headings "Illusory" and "Genuine Workers Governments." It reorders the material and also includes the following passage, not found in either of the two other published texts:

The first two types are not revolutionary workers' governments but, in reality, disguised coalition regimes of the bourgeoisie and anti-revolutionary workers' leaders. Such 'workers' governments' are tolerated by the bourgeoisie at critical moments, in order to deceive the proletariat regarding the true class character of the state or even, utilising the help of corrupt worker leaders, to repulse the proletariat's revolutionary assault and to win time. Communists cannot participate in such a government.

On the contrary, they must stubbornly expose to the masses the real character of such a false workers' government. However, objectively, in the present period of capitalist decline, in which the most important task is to win the majority of the proletariat for proletarian revolution, these governments can help speed the process of decomposition of bourgeois power. (Comintern 1923, p. 17).

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<http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2011/08/14/the-comintern's-unknown-decision-on-workers'-govern>

Footnotes

[1] See my article, "The Origins of United Front Policy.", available on ESSF (article 22600): [The Comintern and the origins of the united front policy](#).

[2] Third Congress resolution "On Tactics," Comintern 1921, pp. 475-6.

[3] Riddell 2011, pp. 266-7.

[4] see, for example, Marxists Internet Archive:
<http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/4th-congress/tactics.htm>

[5] Kun 1933, pp. 301-2.

[6] See, for example, comments of Chris Harman and Tim Potter: <http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=295>.

[7] Riddell 2011, pp. 1159-63.