

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Movements > World level (Movements) > Internationals (socialist, communist, revolutionary) (Movements, World) > International (Third) (Movements, World) > **Comintern's 1922 World Congress: A 'workers' government' as a step toward (...)**

Comintern's 1922 World Congress: A 'workers' government' as a step toward socialism

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Contents

- [Pseudonym or transition](#)
- [Illusory workers' governments](#)
- [Two unaddressed questions](#)
- [An empirical approach](#)
- [Long-term relevance?](#)

The concept of a workers' government is the awkward child of the early Communist International. The thought it expresses is central to Marxism: that workers must strive to take political power. But in the early Comintern, it was attached to a perspective that was contentious for Marxists then and is so now: that workers can form a government that functions initially within a still-existing capitalist state.

As French Marxist Daniel Bensaid commented, "The algebraic formula of a 'workers' government' has given rise over time to the most varied and often contradictory interpretations." [1]

Let us see what light can be shed on this question by the record of the Comintern's 1922 World Congress, recently published in English. [2] This was the gathering that held the Comintern's most extensive discussion of the workers' government question and adopted its initial position.

The congress debate focused on countries like Germany where sustained, mass workers' struggles posed the possibility that working people might form a government. It was therefore necessary to pose the concept of workers' power not just as a long-range perspective but in terms of the existing workers' organizations, with their strengths and weaknesses.

On the other hand, workers in Germany, Italy, France, and neighbouring countries did not then possess a network of revolutionary workers' councils similar to the Russian Soviets of 1917. Most of the organized workers' movement was still directed by pro-capitalist leaders, and Communists were still a minority current in the working class. The question of workers' power had to be addressed in that framework.

In that context, the Comintern had launched efforts to build a united front of workers' struggle, challenging the organizations led by pro-capitalist officials to join in efforts to win immediate demands such as opening the capitalists' financial records, workers' control of distribution of food, shifting the tax burden to the rich, and arming workers for self-defense against reactionary gangs. How could such a program be implemented? By a government of all workers' parties, the Comintern answered — a "workers' government." [3]

Introducing this concept to the Fourth Congress in November 1922, Comintern President Gregory Zinoviev conceded that this was an issue that “has not been sufficiently clarified.” [4] Delegates did indeed advance varied and contradictory interpretations. The text proposed for adoption went through more drafts than any other congress document. Even after its adoption, three different versions were circulated to Comintern parties. [5] Most subsequent English-language discussion has focused on a preliminary draft that differs substantially from the text that the Congress finally adopted.

The debate had opened two years earlier, during a general strike by German workers. The head of the Social Democratic trade unions, Carl Legien, called for formation of a government of workers’ parties and trade unions. His goal, to be sure, was to end the strike and begin to re-establish bourgeois order, as a united Social Democratic government had done after the German revolution of November 1918.

But circumstances had changed. Power no longer rested with revolutionary workers’ councils, as in November 1918, but with a bourgeois coalition regime. A workers’ government would draw its authority not from parliament, where deputies from workers’ parties were a decided minority, but from the workers’ mass movement. The German Communist party stated that, under these conditions, “formation of a socialist government ... would create extremely favourable conditions for vigorous action by the proletarian masses,” and expressed conditional approval of the proposal. [6]

A call for a workers’ government of this type in Germany was included the next year in the Comintern resolution launching a campaign for a workers’ united front. This gave rise to an extended debate, which carried over into the Fourth World Congress in 1922.

Pseudonym or transition

The central issue was whether the term “workers’ government” was merely a pseudonym for the rule of workers’ councils under Communist leadership - a dictatorship of the proletariat - or whether it represented a transitional stage to that goal. The latter concept, warned Amadeo Bordiga, central leader of the Italian Communist Party, implied that the working class can take power “in some way other than through the armed struggle for power.”

Ruth Fischer, who led the leftist minority in the German party, warned that the concept of revolution was being watered down by “styling its hair in ‘Western’ fashion, creating democratic transitional stages between what we have and what we aim for.” Initially, Zinoviev also had held this view. He retracted it as the congress opened but continued to express the underlying thought in more guarded form. [7]

Leaders of the German party majority and Karl Radek, on the other hand, argued that the workers’ government was not a pseudonym for a workers’ dictatorship but a “point of transition” toward it. Achievement of a workers’ government can “lead to a phase of sharpened class struggles through which a proletarian dictatorship will ultimately emerge,” said Ernst Meyer. It will be parliamentary “only in a subordinate sense” and “must be carried by the masses.” Karl Radek called such a government “the starting point of a struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat.” [8]

During the editing process, the congress text was progressively aligned with a “transitional” concept of a workers’ government. The final text sharply counterposed it to a parliamentary-based “bourgeois-Social-Democratic coalition, whether open or disguised.” A workers’ government can be sustained only by the struggles of the masses, the final draft states; its enumerated tasks begin with “arming the proletariat” and end with “breaking the resistance of the counter-revolutionary

bourgeoisie.” [9]

Communists should stand ready to “form a workers’ government with non-Communist workers’ parties and workers’ organizations,” the resolution states, but only “if there are guarantees that the workers’ government will carry out a genuine struggle against the bourgeoisie along the lines described above,” and subject to other safeguards.

Illusory workers’ governments

The clarity of this position was seriously undermined, however, by the simultaneous use of the term “workers’ government” to describe rule by bourgeois workers’ parties that, while introducing some reforms, acted as loyal administrators of the capitalist order. This concept was voiced mainly by Zinoviev, who thus managed to stand simultaneously on both the left and the right wings of the discussion. Zinoviev used the expression “liberal workers’ government” to describe the Labour regimes that had administered the Australian capitalist state after 1904 and a future Labour Party government in Britain. Such a regime, he said, “could be the jumping-off point for revolutionizing the country,” could take many steps “objectively directed against the bourgeois state,” and “can finish in the hands of the left wing.” Surprisingly, Zinoviev saw a parallel here with the role of the Russian Mensheviks in 1917. [10]

This position was opposed by leaders of the German delegation, who submitted an amendment distinguishing between “illusory” and “genuine” workers’ governments. The amendment also specified that the illusory “liberal” or “Social Democratic” workers’ governments

“...are not revolutionary workers’ governments at all, but in reality hidden coalition governments between the bourgeoisie and antirevolutionary workers’ leaders. Such “workers’ governments” are tolerated at critical moments by the weakened bourgeoisie, in order to deceive the proletariat ... fend off the proletariat’s revolutionary onslaught and win time. Communists cannot take part in such a government. On the contrary, they must relentlessly expose to the masses the true nature of such a false “workers’ government.” [11]

Although adopted unanimously, the amendment was not incorporated into the published Russian version of the resolution, which has served as the basis for translations into English. As a result, English-language comment on this issue, singling out Zinoviev’s position for attack, has criticized the congress for the very weakness that its delegates sought to remedy.

Two unaddressed questions

Two other important aspects of the workers’ government issue, although posed in the congress, were left unaddressed.

The first concerned the role of peasants. During the congress debate, Vasil Kolarov, the senior delegate from Bulgaria, said that “the workers’ government is not posed in agrarian countries like the Balkans.” The final resolution, by contrast, referred to the possibility of a “government of workers and the poorer peasants” in regions such as the Balkans and Czechoslovakia. [12]

This question was most urgently posed in Bulgaria, governed by a radical peasant party that was facing a threatened coup by rightist forces. Here, an ideal opportunity to apply the concept of a workers’ and peasants’ government was blocked by the Bulgarian Communists’ hostility to ruling peasant party. No congress delegate mentioned the situation in Bulgaria. Only a few months later,

the Bulgarian Communists' sectarianism contributed to a tragic defeat of the workers' movement.

The second unaddressed issue concerned the nature of workers' rule. The resolution's final text stated that "a genuinely proletarian workers' government ... in its pure form can be embodied only in the Communist Party." Zinoviev said that only this variant "is indeed a pseudonym for the dictatorship of the proletariat." The implication was that if Communists allied with non-Communist forces in a revolutionary government, this was only a temporary expedient until the Communists were strong enough to rule alone.

A comment by Leon Trotsky suggested quite a different approach. Describing the Bolsheviks' alliance with the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries in the first months of Soviet rule, Trotsky said the Left SRs had been ousted from the government on their own initiative, not that of the Bolsheviks. [13]

Nothing further was said on this point. As published, the resolution suggests a lack of clarity on the difference between workers' rule and rule by the Communist Party.

An empirical approach

The resolution contains a typology of workers' governments with five categories. In each case, delegates were thinking of a specific context, as follows:

- * Illusory: Liberal workers' government (Britain).
- * Illusory: Social-Democratic workers' government (Germany).
- * Genuine: Government of workers and peasants (Balkans).
- * Genuine: Workers' government with Communist participation. (Germany).
- * Genuinely proletarian workers' government (Soviet Russia). [14]

Zinoviev stressed to congress delegates that this list was not complete and that other types of workers' governments could occur. He warned that "in the search for a rigorous scientific definition, we might overlook the political side of the situation." [15] In other words, the Comintern's approach was not prescriptive but empirical. It sought to analyze situations actually posed in the struggle at that moment.

There were at that time three previous examples of workers' governments, none of which fit neatly into this five-point schema. Thus:

- * The Paris Commune, an elected revolutionary workers' government at war with a still-existing bourgeois regime.
- * The early Soviet republic: as noted, a coalition regime based on revolutionary workers' and peasants' soviets.
- * The revolutionary governments of Bavaria and Hungary in 1919, where, as Chris Harman and Tim Potter have noted, "bourgeois power virtually collapsed.... The workers' government came into being and afterwards had to create the structure of proletarian power." [16]

The resolution also said nothing regarding the government that might result in the colonial and

semi-colonial countries from the struggle for an anti-imperialist united front. This question was urgently posed in the years following the congress in China, where a mistaken Comintern policy resulted in a calamitous defeat. In the year of that setback, the United Opposition in the Bolshevik Party, led by Trotsky and Zinoviev, formulated a governmental proposal for China based on the Bolshevik strategic arsenal from the years before 1917: a revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. [17] A heated debate broke out in both the German party and the Comintern as to whether this stand was appropriate. Trotsky was soon to repudiate the concept. Nonetheless, it remains among the possible variants of a workers' and peasants' government.

Long-term relevance?

Almost a century has passed since the Comintern debated the workers' government question. The revolutionary era that began in 1914 has passed away; we are headed toward new revolutions, under new conditions. There is no equivalent today of the mass Communist parties of the 1920s. The Comintern's decisions on governmental policy were rooted in a political environment that no longer exists.

It can be harmful to employ the Comintern decisions as a template to be imposed on a vastly different reality. The relevance of its workers' government discussion lies rather in alerting us to the possibility that working people should strive for governmental power even in the absence of a soviet-type network of workers' councils.

The Fourth Congress decision suggest that workers' efforts to form a government, far from representing a barrier to socialist revolution, can be a significant transitional step toward its realization. The decision also sketches out conditions under which a workers' government may actually exist within a capitalist state, for a transitional period, with positive results.

The early Comintern position retains its relevance to struggles for socialism in the new century. This gives us good reason to revisit the debates in the Comintern's first half-decade of activity over its awkward but vigorous child, the concept of a workers' government.

John Riddell, January 1, 2012

P.S.

* <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2012/01/01/a-workers-government-as-a-step-toward-socialism/>

* This working paper was presented as part of the International Communist Movement stream of the Eighth Historical Materialism Annual Conference in London, England, on November 11, 2011.

For the variant texts of the Fourth Comintern Congress decision on workers' governments, see "[The Comintern's unknown decision on workers' governments.](#)" also on ESSF (article 22599) website..

Footnotes

[1] Daniel Bensaid, 2011, *La Politique comme art stratégique*, Paris: Éditions Syllepse, p. 69.

[2] John Riddell (ed.), 2012, *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922* (hereafter TUF), Leiden: Brill.

[3] See "[When "Security" Looms Larger Than Tsunami-](#)" on ESSF website (article 1127).

[4] TUF, p. 129.

[5] For the three texts, see "[The Comintern's unknown decision on workers' governments.](#)" on ESSF (article 22599) website.

[6] Pierre Broué, 2005, *The German Revolution 1917-1923*, Leiden: Brill, 369.

[7] TUF, pp. 182, 147.

[8] TUF, pp. 139-40, 167.

[9] TUF, p. 1159.

[10] TUF, pp. 266-7.

[11] TUF, pp. 1098-9.

[12] TUF, pp. 243, 1161.

[13] TUF, p. 1161, 267, 1003.

[14] TUF, p. 1160-1.

[15] TUF, p. 267-8.

[16] Chris Harman and Tim Potter, "The Workers' Government," in *International Socialism*, February 7, 2007.

[17] Leon Trotsky 1980, *Challenge of the Left Opposition*, vol. 2, New York: Pathfinder, p. 369.