

# **Council Communism**

Mark Shipway

1987

# Contents

Theoretical Questions . . . . .	6
Workers' Councils and Communism . . . . .	11
Council Communism and Councilism . . . . .	13

Council communism is a theory of working-class struggle and revolution which holds that the means that workers will use to fight capitalism, overthrow it, and establish and administer communist society, will be the workers' councils.

Historically, workers' councils (or 'soviets', from the Russian word for council) first arose in Russia in 1905. During that year, workers in many industrial areas engaged in mass strike. In the absence of any widespread trade-union organisation, these strikes were organised by committees of delegates elected from the factory floor. Where workers of several trades or industries were on strike at the same time, delegates from the separate strike committees often met in central bodies to unify and coordinate the struggle. The most famous example of this was the St Petersburg Soviet, formed in October 1905. As well as agitating over economic issues, such as limitation of the length of the working day, the soviets raised political demands, such as for the convocation of Constituent Assembly.

The events in Russia in 1905 made a considerable impact on revolutionaries in Western Europe, and particularly Germany. At this stage, however, the soviets were not yet regarded as the most important feature of the struggle; Anton Pannekoek, a leading theoretician of council communism whose writings will form the basis of this account, recalled later that the soviets were 'hardly noticed as a special phenomenon' at the time.<sup>1</sup> Instead it was the mass strikes of 1905 which made the greatest impression, as typified by Rosa Luxemburg's famous account of 1905, which was titled *The Mass Strike*, and which contained only one fleeting reference to the soviets.<sup>2</sup>

For revolutionaries such as Pannekoek and Luxemburg of the 'left wing' of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) the mass strike was one of the first signs of the emergency of new forms of organisation and struggle corresponding to new developments within capitalism. After the First World War this recognition was developed into a theory which saw the working class's use of parliament and trade unions as belonging to a period when capitalism was still an expanding system and workers were able to win substantial reforms. From around the turn of the century onwards, however, as capitalism entered the crisis which led to the First World War, it became increasingly difficult for workers to wrest any concessions from the ruling class other than through action on a mass scale. Furthermore, the end of capitalist expansion also opened up the prospect of a revolutionary overthrow of system, and this was again a task to which new forms of mass action would be fitted better than the old parliamentary and trade-union methods.

When the workers' councils re-emerged in Russia following the February Revolution in 1917 they surpassed the point they reached in 1905, setting themselves up as a rival to the authority of the state and then (or so it seemed at the time) seizing power themselves in the October Revolution. 'Now their importance was grasped by the workers of Western Europe', wrote Pannekoek.<sup>3</sup> In a pamphlet completed in July 1918, another prominent council communist, Herman Gorter, wrote of the soviets in Russia: 'The working class of the world has found in these Workers' Councils its organisation and its centralisation, its form and its expression, for the revolution and for the Socialist society.'<sup>4</sup>

Under the impact of the Russian Revolution, and the German Revolution the following year, various small revolutionary groups which had split from the SPD over its support for the First

---

<sup>1</sup> Anton Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils* (1941-2) (Cambridge, Mass.: Root and Branch, 1970) p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> See Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions* (1906) (London: Merlin, no date)

<sup>3</sup> Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. 83.

<sup>4</sup> Herman Gorter, *The World Revolution* (1918) (Glasgow; Socialist Information and Research Bureau (Scotland), 1920) p. 61.

World War formed themselves into the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), voting by a majority to adopt anti-parliamentary and anti-trade union positions at the founding congress in 1918. When referring to this period, this anti-parliamentary and anti-trade-union majority can for convenience's sake be called 'left communists', since at the time their political views appeared to be a 'more extreme' version of the 'orthodoxy' by which they were defined, i.e. the Bolshevism of Lenin and the Third International.

Before long, however, the apparently tactical differences between the left communists and the Bolsheviks came to a head. During 1919 the left communist majority was forced out of the KPD by means of bureaucratic manoeuvring, and in April 1920 formed itself into the Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD). The KAPD was one of the groups which Lenin attacked in his polemic against *'Left-Wing' Communism, an Infantile Disorder* (1920).<sup>5</sup>

Lenin's criticisms were answered immediately by Herman Gorter in a lengthy 'Open Letter to Comrade Lenin', written in the summer of 1920. Gorter had already expressed the basic premise of the 'Open Letter' in his 1918 work on *The World Revolution*, when he had argued that 'The condition of the Western European Revolution, especially in England and Germany, are entirely unlike, and cannot be compared with, those of the Russian Revolution.'<sup>6</sup> Gorter argued that in Russia the working class had been able to ally with the peasantry to overthrow a weak ruling class. In Western Europe, on the other hand, the working class had no natural allies, and faced a very powerful ruling class. Therefore all tactics for the class struggle in Western Europe had to aim at increasing the power, autonomy and class consciousness of the workers. The tactics advocated by Lenin and the Third International — such as participation in parliament and in the trade unions, and alliances with Social Democratic Parties came nowhere near to fulfilling such criteria. According in Gorter:

“As the Third International does not believe in the fact that in Western Europe the proletariat will stand alone, it neglects the mental development of this proletariat; which in every respect is deeply entangled in the bourgeois ideology as yet; and chooses tactics which leave the slavery and subjection to bourgeois ideas unmo-  
lestled, intact.

The Left Wing [by contrast] chooses its tactics in such a way that in the first place the mind of the worker is made free.”<sup>7</sup>

At first, the KAPD, along with like-minded groups from other countries, fought for its perspectives within the Third International, believing that “Whoever wishes to conduct the West-European revolution according to the tactics and by the road of the Russian revolution, is not qualified to conduct it.”<sup>8</sup> It met with no success in this struggle, however, and left the International in 1921 after the Third Congress.

Soon afterwards, a section of the KAPD (the so-called 'Essen tendency') tried to set up a new, Fourth (Communist Workers') International. Given the reflux of the post-war revolutionary wave,

---

<sup>5</sup> V. I. Lenin. *Collected Works*, vol. XXXI (Moscow: Progress, 1996) pp. 17ff.

<sup>6</sup> Gorter. *The World Revolution*, p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> Herman Gorter, 'Open Letter to Comrade Lenin', *Workers' Dreadnought*, 11 June 1921. The 'Open letter' (more commonly known nowadays as 'Reply to Lenin') was published in the *Workers' Dreadnought*, the newspaper of the left communists in Britain who were grouped around Sylvia Pankhurst, between 12 March and 11 June 1921.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 June 1921.

such a venture was doomed to failure, but the Fourth International (or KAI) is still interesting in that the attempt to establish it had to be justified by a critique of the Third International, the Russian state, and the Russian Revolution.

The ‘Manifesto of the Fourth Communist International’ (written by Gorter in 1921) argued that the Russian Revolution had been a ‘dual revolution’: in the towns, a working-class, communist revolution against capitalism, and, in the countryside, a peasant, capitalist revolution against feudalism. This contradictory and antagonistic duality had been resolved in favour of peasant-capitalist interests in 1921, with the introduction of the New Economic Policy. Thenceforth the ‘Soviet Government’ had ceased to serve working-class interests; it had become a capitalist state. Insofar as the Third International was tied to the interests of the Russian state, it too had become a capitalist institution. Hence the need for the formation of a new workers’ International.<sup>9</sup>

While Gorter was characterising the Russian Revolution as a ‘dual revolution’ – part communist, part capitalist – other left communists went further in their critique. In 1921, Pannekoek argued that ‘the Russian revolution is a bourgeois revolution, like the French one of 1789’.<sup>10</sup> In time this view became predominant among the left communists. By 1923 Gorter seemed to have abandoned his ‘dual revolution’ thesis when he argued that ‘even in their First, revolutionary, so-called communist stage, the Bolsheviks showed their bourgeois character’.<sup>11</sup> Another left communist, Otto Rühle, had come to the conclusion that the Russian Revolution had been a capitalist revolution even before Pannekoek or Gorter, and in 1924 he too wrote that the Russian Revolution had been ‘the last in the line of the great bourgeois revolutions of Europe’.<sup>12</sup>

Thereafter the term ‘left communism’ became increasingly redundant. What had initially appeared to be disagreements over the tactics of the working-class revolution in Russia and Western Europe were now understood as fundamental differences between the methods of the *capitalist* revolution in Russia and the *communist* revolution in Western Europe.

Revolutionaries such as Gorter, Rühle and Pannekoek analysed the Russian Revolution as a ‘bourgeois’ revolution leading to the establishment of state capitalism. For the working class the lasting significance of the Russian Revolution did not lie in the type of society to which it had given rise, but in the forms of action used by the Russian workers during the revolution:

“Russia showed to the European and American workers, confined within reformist ideas and practice, first how an industrial working class by gigantic mass actions of wild strikes is able to undermine and destroy an obsolete state power; and second, how in such actions the strike committees develop into workers’ councils, organs of fight and of self-management, acquiring political tasks and functions.”<sup>13</sup>

Thus, through their central emphasis on the council form, those formerly styled ‘left communists’ came to be known as ‘council communists’.

---

<sup>9</sup> The ‘Manifesto of the Fourth Communist International’ was published in the *Workers’ Dreadnought* between 8 October and 10 December 1921.

<sup>10</sup> Anton Pannekoek, ‘Sovjet-Rusland en het West-Europeesche Kommunisme’, in *De Nieuwe Tijd* (1921), translated in S. Bricianer, *Pannekoek and the Workers’ Councils* (Saint Louis: Telos, 1978) p. 229.

<sup>11</sup> Herman Goner, *The Communist Workers’ International* (1923) (London; 1977) p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Otto Rühle, *From the Bourgeois to the Proletarian Revolution* (1924) (Glasgow/London: Revolutionary Perspectives/Socialist Reproduction, 1974) p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Pannekoek, *Workers’ Councils*, p. 86.

At the beginning of the 1920s the KAPD had claimed a membership in excess of 40 000. In close alliance were a further 200 000 workers in the revolutionary anti-trade-union ‘factory organisations’ under the umbrella of the General Workers’ Union of Germany (AAUD). However, as is the case with any active communist organisations outside periods of revolutionary turmoil, these numbers steadily decreased throughout the 1920s, so that by the 1930s the council communists existed only as small, scattered propagandist groups, mainly in Germany and Holland. The Dutch Group of International Communists (GIG), which was formed in 1927, published the journal *Rätekorrespondenz* (‘Council Correspondence’). This served as the vehicle for numerous important theoretical debates, many of which were taken up by the German revolutionary emigrés in the USA who had started publication of *International Council Correspondence* (later known as *Living Marxism* and then as *New Essays*) in 1934. This was edited by the ex-KAPD member Paul Mattick, and its contributors included Rühle, Pannekoek and Karl Korsch. The group in America had some contact with the longest-surviving British council communist organisation, the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation. The APCF (formed in 1921) published a succession of newspapers, the best and last of which was *Solidarity* (1938–44). During the Second World War Anton Pannekoek wrote what is probably the best-known expression of council communist ideas, *Workers’ Councils*, and he continued to contribute articles to the revolutionary press until his death in 1960. In the USA Paul Mattick published a number of books after the war, mainly concerned with a Marxist critique of bourgeois economics. His *Anti-Bolshevik Communism* (1978) collected together the fruits of a life-time’s commitment to the revolutionary movement.<sup>14</sup>

## Theoretical Questions

In examining the principal theoretical ideas of council communism, it is useful to bear in mind that council communism originally emerged *in opposition* to certain dominant trends within the existing workers’ movement, in particular within Social Democracy and syndicalism. In fact, council communist ideas are perhaps most easily understood when approached from this angle.

In one sense, therefore, council communism can be seen as a critique of the use of parliament and trade unions as weapons in the class struggle. In his early writings, Anton Pannekoek did not reject these outright. His text on *Tactical Differences Within the Workers’ Movement* (1909) argued that parliamentary debates and propaganda during election campaigns could be used to ‘enlighten the workers about their class situation’. Trade-union organisation could impart a sense of discipline, solidarity, and collective class consciousness. Agitation for reforms could also conceivably increase workers’ class consciousness and organisational strength.<sup>15</sup> However, this assessment of the worth of parliament, trade unionism and reformist agitation indicates the point of view from which the council communists evaluated all forms of struggle, a point of view which Pannekoek summed up in *Workers’ Councils*:

“Here is the criterion for every form of action, for tactics and methods of fight, for forms of organisation: do they enhance the power of the workers? For the present,

---

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed account of the German council communists during the 1920s and 1930s, and of the groups they influenced in other countries, see Denis Authier and Jean Barrot, *La Gauche communiste en Allemagne (1918-1921)* (Paris: Payot, 1976), especially pp. 189–216 and 221–30.

<sup>15</sup> See Bricianer, 1978, pp. 73–117.

but, still more essential, for the future, for the supreme goal of annihilating capitalism?”<sup>16</sup>

As we have seen, in his polemic with Lenin, Herman Gorter had argued that all revolutionary tactics had to aim at increasing the power, autonomy and class consciousness of the workers. This was a point of view shared by Pannekoek, and it was on the basis of such criteria that council communists rejected the old methods of Social Democracy. Thus, in 1920 Pannekoek summed up his opposition to the use of parliament as follows:

“parliamentary activity is the paradigm of struggles in which only the leaders are actively involved and in which the masses themselves play a subordinate role. It consists in individual deputies carrying on the main battle; this is bound to arouse the illusion among the masses that others can do their fighting for them.

... the tactical problem is how we are to eradicate the traditional bourgeois mentality which paralyses the strength of the proletarian masses; everything which lends new power to the received conceptions is harmful. The most tenacious and intractable element in this mentality is dependence upon leaders, whom the masses leave to determine general questions and to manage their class affairs. *Parliamentarianism inevitably tends to inhibit the autonomous activity by the masses that is necessary for revolution.*”<sup>17</sup>

Before the First World War, Pannekoek had also criticised trade-union activity by putting exactly the same emphasis on class consciousness and autonomous activity. Within the unions, he argued:

“Success or failure appears to depend on the personal qualities of the leaders, on their strategic skill, on their ability to read a situation correctly; while the enthusiasm and experience of the masses themselves are not regarded as active factors.”<sup>18</sup>

“Success of mass movements depends on their capacity for autonomous action, their unquenchable ardour for battle, and the boldness and initiative of the masses. But it is precisely these qualities, the primary condition of the struggle for freedom that are repressed and annihilated by trade union discipline.”<sup>19</sup>

As well as being a critique of parliamentary and trade-unionist methods from the point of view of working-class self-emancipation, council communism also emerged as an opposition to dominant ideas about what the overthrow of capitalism would involve, and how this would come about. In 1938 Pannekoek wrote:

---

<sup>16</sup> Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. 104.

<sup>17</sup> Anton Pannekoek, *World Revolution and Communist Tactics* (1920), in D. A. Smart, *Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism* (London: Pluto, 1978) pp. 110–11 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>18</sup> Anton Pannekoek, *Tactical Differences Within the Workers' Movement*, in Bricianer, 1978, p. 105.

<sup>19</sup> Anton Pannekoek, ‘Gewerkschaftsdisziplin’, *Bremer Bürger-Zeitung* (18 October 1913), translated in Bricianer, 1978, p. 132.

“There are many who think of the proletarian revolution ... as a series of consecutive phases: first, conquest of government and instalment of a new government, then expropriation of the capitalist class by law, and then a new organisation of the process of production.”<sup>20</sup>

This had been the dominant conception within the Social Democratic Second International. Similarly schematic conceptions of revolution also prevailed within the syndicalist movement, which looked, for the most part, to the gradual building up of industrial unions within capitalism, the overthrow of the ruling class by the General Strike, and then the reorganisation of society by the unions.

Council communists rejected these ideas. In *Workers' Councils* Pannekoek wrote that ‘victory will not be one event, finishing the fight and introducing a then following period of reconstruction’,<sup>21</sup> nor would it involve a series of ‘different consecutive occurrences’.<sup>22</sup> In Pannekoek’s view:

“The revolution by which the working class will win mastery and freedom, is not a single event of limited duration. It is a process of organisation, of self-education, in which the workers gradually, now in progressing rise, then in steps and leaps, develop the force to vanquish the bourgeoisie, to destroy capitalism, and to build up their new system of collective production.”<sup>23</sup>

This idea of revolution as a *process* is central to council communism, and it leads us directly to a consideration of council communist ideas concerning class consciousness and organisation, which Pannekoek described in 1909 as ‘those two pillars of working class power’.<sup>24</sup> In the council communists’ view, revolution would involve the mass action of a vast majority of the working class. This was one of the principal points of divergence between the council communists and the Bolsheviks. The communist revolution wrote Pannekoek in 1938:

“cannot be attained by an ignorant mass, confident followers of a party presenting itself as an expert leadership. It can be attained only if the workers themselves, the entire class, understand the conditions, ways and means of their fight; when every man knows, from his own judgement, what to do. They must, every man of them, act themselves, decide themselves, hence think out and know for themselves.”<sup>25</sup>

As this passage illustrates very well, mass *action* is inseparable from mass *consciousness*, and the council communists continually emphasised that widespread class consciousness was one of the essential conditions of working-class self-emancipation. This is not to say, however, that the council communists thought that widespread class consciousness was an essential precondition of revolution, if this is taken to mean that the majority of the working class must be fully class

---

<sup>20</sup> Pannekoek, ‘General Remarks on the Question of Organisation’, in *Living Marxism*, IV: 5 (November 1938), reproduced in Bricianer, 1978, p. 273.

<sup>21</sup> Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. 54.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>24</sup> Pannekoek, *Tactical Differences Within the Worker' Movement*, in Bricianer, 1978, p. 87.

<sup>25</sup> Anton Pannekoek, *Lenin As Philosophy* (1938) (London: Merlin, 1975) p. 103.



conscious *before* any revolutionary action can be attempted. The emphasis in council communism tended towards the reverse of such a relationship between class consciousness and class action. As Pannekoek put it, the struggles of the workers ‘are not so much the result as the starting point of their spiritual development’.<sup>26</sup> In keeping with their idea of revolution as a process, the council communists argued that *generalised, widespread* class consciousness could only be a product of workers’ active engagement in the class struggle itself. In her account of the 1905 Russian Revolution, Rosa Luxemburg had argued that the ‘high degree of political education, of class consciousness and organisation’ which the working class needed if its struggles were to be successful could not be brought about ‘by pamphlets and leaflets, but only by the living political school, by the fight and in the fight, in the continuous course of the revolution’.<sup>27</sup> Luxemburg’s conception was shared by the council communists; in 1927 Pannekoek argued that class consciousness:

“is not learned from books, or through courses on theory and political formation, but through real life practice of the class struggle. It is true that prior to action, as well as after action, theory can be expressed in concepts that present organized knowledge; but, in order to develop in a real sense, this knowledge itself must be acquired in the hard school of experience, a harsh lived experience that shapes the mind in the full heat of combat ... It is only through the practice of its struggles against capitalism ... that the proletariat is transformed into a revolutionary class capable of conquering the capitalist system.”<sup>28</sup>

In parallel with their view that widespread class consciousness would emerge from active mass involvement in the class struggle, rather than from ‘simply converting people through propaganda to new political opinions’,<sup>29</sup> the council communists also anticipated that working-class organisation, the second essential condition of the communist revolution, would arise in a similar way. The revolution could not be prepared in advance through gradually organising the working class in readiness for the single, decisive revolutionary act. In 1912 Anton Pannekoek criticised the attitude which held that revolution was ‘an event in the future, a political apocalypse, and all we have to do meanwhile is prepare for the final show-down by gathering our strength and assembling and drilling our troops’.<sup>30</sup> Against this attitude he had put forward the view that:

“it is only by the struggle for power itself that the masses can be assembled, drilled and formed into an organisation capable of taking power.”<sup>31</sup>

He repeated this view in *Workers’ Councils*:

“The workers’ forces are like an army that assembles during the battle! They must grow by the fight itself.”<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Pannekoek, *Workers’ Councils*, p. 98.

<sup>27</sup> Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike*, p. 32.

<sup>28</sup> Anton Pannekoek, ‘Prinzip und Taktik’, *Proletarier*, 7–8 (1927), translated in Bricianer, 1978, pp. 241–2.

<sup>29</sup> Pannekoek, *Workers’ Councils*, p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> Pannekoek, ‘Marxist Theory and Revolutionary Tactics’, in *Die Neue Zeit*, XXXI (1912), translated in Smart, 1978, p. 52.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>32</sup> Pannekoek, *Workers’ Councils*, p. 91.

Here Pannekoek's ideas echoed Rosa Luxemburg's formulation of the relationship between class struggle and organisation in *The Mass Strike*: 'the organisation does not supply the troops for the struggle, but the struggle, in an ever growing degree, supplies recruits for the organisation'.<sup>33</sup> In 1920 Pannekoek argued that mass revolutionary organisations (such as the 'One Big Union' or 'Industrial Unions' that syndicalists sought to create) could not be:

“set up within a still passive workforce in readiness for the revolutionary feeling of the workers to function within it in time to come: this new form of organisation can itself only be set up in the process of revolution, by workers making a revolutionary intervention.”<sup>34</sup>

One example which Pannekoek used in *Workers' Councils* illustrates excellently the council communists' ideas about organisation. In the USA in the 1930s the presence of large numbers of unemployed (and therefore potential blackleg) workers meant that 'Any regular strike against wage cuttings was made impossible, because the shops after being left by the strikers, immediately would be flooded by the masses outside.' To overcome this problem, workers adopted the *occupation* tactic, i.e. going on strike, but remaining in the workplace. Workers also found that by occupying the workplace collectively, the striking workforce was no longer 'dispersed over the streets and homes ... separated into loose individuals', and that strikes no longer had to be 'accompanied by a continuous fight with the police over the use of streets and rooms for meeting'. As Pannekoek pointed out, the occupation tactic, which almost as a by-product increased the solidarity and active participation of those on strike, was not planned consciously in advance of the actual struggles: 'It was not invented by theory, it arose spontaneously out of practical needs; theory can do no more than afterwards explain its causes and consequences.'<sup>35</sup> Again, there is a continuity here between the ideas of the council communists and of Rosa Luxemburg, for in 1904 Luxemburg had argued that 'fighting tactics' were not 'invented' by revolutionaries, but were:

“the result of a progressive series of great creative acts in the course of the experimenting and often elemental class struggle ... the unconscious precedes the conscious, the logic of the objective historical process goes before the subjective logic of its spokesmen.”<sup>36</sup>

Thus organisation and class consciousness are linked through a dialectical relationship. New forms of struggle and organisation arise spontaneously, in the sense that they are not planned consciously in advance, and they arise as a practical response to the problems faced by workers in the course of their struggles. Once these new forms have arisen, however, they can be made more widely known, and other groups of workers can begin to act on their example.

To sum up these ideas, from the council communist point of view the revolutionary process can be seen as one in which the working class continually adopts new ideas and new forms of organisation in response to the practical problems which confront it in the course of the class

---

<sup>33</sup> Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike*, p. 62.

<sup>34</sup> Pannekoek, *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*, in Smart, 1978, p. 116.

<sup>35</sup> Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. 72.

<sup>36</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, 'Organisational Questions of the Proletarian Revolution' (originally titled 'Organisational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy'), in *Leninism or Marxism* (Glasgow: Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation, 1935) p. 14.

struggle. Once workers have taken up the fight against the attacks of the ruling class, the necessity to overcome the practical problems which crop up in the course of the fight pushes workers towards the realisation that existing forms of organisation are no longer adequate to their tasks, and that new forms have to be developed. In the course of an escalating struggle each practical step forward taken by the working class in serious pursuit of its demands leads in the direction of the overthrow of the existing system and the simultaneous reorganisation of society in the working class's own interests. As Pannekoek put it in 1920:

“without being communist by conviction, the masses are more and more following the path which communism shows them, for practical necessity is driving them in that direction”.<sup>37</sup>

This is not a unilinear process; advances and retreats follow one another. None the less, the underlying tendency is towards communism, if for no other reason than that reliance on outmoded ideas and forms of organisation invariably leads to defeats, whereas the adoption of new ideas and new forms brings successes. In his book, *Lenin as Philosopher* (1938), Pannekoek based this conception on a fundamental ‘theory of knowledge’:

“On the basis of his experiences man derives generalisations and rules, natural laws, on which his expectations are based. They are generally correct, as is witnessed by his survival. Sometimes, however, false conclusions may be drawn, with failure and destruction in their wake. Life is a continuous process of learning, adaptation, development. Practice is the unsparing test of the correctness of thinking.”<sup>38</sup>

## Workers’ Councils and Communism

This basic account of council communism can be completed with a description of the role of the workers’ councils within council communist theory. As was the case with the council communists’ ideas on class consciousness and organisation, their emphasis on workers’ councils is also understood best in the context of the central concept of revolution as a process. If revolution is a process, rather than a series of consecutive but separate events, then it follows that there must be a single organisational form which can be used by the working class throughout all phases of the struggle. In a slightly schematic way, it could be said that since communism is based on common ownership and democratic control of the means of production and distribution, the organisations which carry out the communist revolution must be ones which are suited to the realisation of this final goal. As Pannekoek wrote in 1938:

“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.”<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Pannekoek, *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*, in Smart, 1978, p. 95.

<sup>38</sup> Pannekoek, *Lenin As Philosopher*, p. 17.

<sup>39</sup> Pannekoek, ‘General Remarks on the Question of Organisation’, in Bricianer. 1978, p. 273.

The organisations which the working class uses to fight against capitalism are therefore in a sense *pre-figurative* of the organisations which are used for the construction and administration of the new, communist society.

Council communists have commonly expected the workers' councils to emerge from mass strike movements where workers would take the conduct of their struggle into their own hands rather than leaving it up to existing organisations such as the trade unions. All strikers would meet in regular mass assemblies to discuss and organise the struggle, and to elect strike committees whose members would be delegates mandated by and answerable to the general assemblies and who could be recalled and replaced at any time. Where the strike centres were geographically dispersed, or as other sections of the working class joined the strike movement, delegates from the separate strike committees would meet in central bodies to unite and coordinate the struggle.

To the extent that it began to draw in wider and wider sections of the working class, the movement's demands would tend to outstrip their original starting-point, and tend towards the expression of the interests of the working class as a whole. At the same time, as a consequence of the interests of the entire working class being at stake, the general assemblies would be open to all those involved in the struggle- revolutionaries, families and relatives of strikers, inhabitants of the surrounding communities, the unemployed, and so on.

Within a fairly short space of time, the general assemblies and the local and central strike committees would be faced with tasks other than the pursuit of 'economic' demands. For example, they would perhaps have to publish bulletins or newspapers, in order to spread information, keep everyone fully informed about what was happening, and combat propaganda put out by the ruling class. They might also have to form militias in order to defend themselves against attacks from the armed forces of the ruling class, and to take the struggle onto the offensive. Thus through these and other necessary measures the strike committees would take on *political* functions, becoming in the process true workers' councils or soviets, organs of working-class power, rivalling the authority of the capitalist state.

Before long the workers would also be faced with the necessity of organising food and power supplies and other essential services, whose normal functioning would have been paralysed by the strike movement, in order to supply their own material needs. Where factories and workplaces were occupied by workers, to all intents and purposes the owning class would have been expropriated, and production and distribution would be restarted according to the needs of the workers. Here technical, social and political decisions would be on the agenda: methods of production, what to produce and in what quantities, the basis of distribution in the event of shortages and so on. The workers would express their interests in all these matters by exactly the same means they had been using throughout the struggle: through their mass assemblies and committees of recallable delegates. In other words, 'The workers' councils growing up as organs of fight will at the same time be organs of reconstruction.'<sup>40</sup>

It is not hard to see the connections between this brief scenario and the theme of 'non-market socialism', for in the situation described above all the essential features of a non-market society are present, albeit in the most rudimentary, embryonic form: the property of the capitalist minority has been expropriated and is now the common possession of the workers; the uses to which the means of production shall be put are no longer decided by the capitalist minority but are

---

<sup>40</sup> Pannekoek. *Workers' Councils*, p. 54.

determined by democratic discussion and decision-making in which all workers have an equal chance of participation; the fruits of production are distributed according to needs expressed by the workers, rather than according to capitalist considerations of exchange, profit and the market. It would be the birth of a moneyless society based on common ownership and democratic control of the world's resources, i.e. non-market socialism or communism (both of which terms mean the same thing).

## **Council Communism and Councillism**

The above sketch of the role of the workers' councils in the communist revolution is a suitable starting-point for an assessment of this current's strengths and weaknesses. Although the preceding account has been couched in speculative, 'would be' terms, this gives a misleading impression of council communism; council communists have always rooted their ideas firmly in the real experiences and struggles of the working class, and the councils themselves have arisen repeatedly in different periods and various circumstances during highpoints of the class struggle. Although not always conforming in every exact detail to the rough outline sketched above — the councils of the German Revolution in 1918, for example, arose from the apparent collapse of state power following Germany's defeat in the war, rather than from a mass strike movement — on several occasions the actions of the working class have followed the pattern described.

Even outside of the pantheon of 'highpoints' — such as Russia 1905 and 1917, and Germany 1918 — there have been other times when workers' struggles have shown a tendency towards the emergence of the council form, even if they have often ultimately failed to realise their potential. The mass strikes of July-August 1980 in Poland are a case in point. This massive struggle was sparked off by the state's announcement of increases in food prices. The Polish workers responded with demands for large wage rises, and since they were well aware that the trade unions were a part of the state, they took control of their actions themselves, meeting in mass assemblies to elect mandated, recallable delegates. Rather than fighting separately, the workers extended and centralised their fight. In several regions inter-factory strike committees (MKS) were formed, constituted by delegates from scores of different workplaces. As well as negotiating with the state, the MKS also set up groups of workers to defend occupied shipyards and factories, and organised the supply of food, power, and other essential services to a limited extent; in other words, they took on some political and social functions beyond the scope of their 'economic' origins.

Council communism therefore has the definite merit of being based on something which actually exists and which cannot be eradicated, short of revolution: the continuing struggle within capitalism between the capitalist and working classes. It does not regard revolution as something which occurs on a totally different plane from, quite unconnected to, the everyday struggle of the workers. It sees communism as a potential lying within the everyday struggle, which will emerge from this very struggle. For the council communists, therefore, the 'communist movement' is not just the few organised groups of workers who are already class conscious; the 'communist movement' is also the 'movement towards communism', the real underlying tendency of workers' struggles within capitalism, which is indeed what gives rise to organised groups of revolutionaries in the first place.

According to council communist theory, the workers' councils are revolutionary organisations. They are not *permanent* mass organisations of the working class. They emerge at times of intense political, social or economic crisis when workers find themselves compelled to take matters into their own hands. Their sole purpose is to negate the authority of one class and install the power of another over every aspect of society. If they do not succeed in this task, the councils usually disappear with the defeat of the movement which produces them; in other words, when their source and lifeblood, the initiative, vitality and creativity of the working class, is drained away. Any attempt to maintain a permanent existence outside revolutionary periods changes the councils' nature: either they take on non-revolutionary functions (for example, negotiating with the ruling class 'on behalf of' the workers) or else they turn into small propagandist groups defending a political programme.

The potential for the emergence of workers' councils would thus seem to be tied closely to a contingent circumstance: the breakdown of the existing political, social or economic 'order'. In 1920 Pannekoek wrote that 'Economic collapse is the most powerful spur to revolution.'<sup>41</sup> At that time, very few revolutionaries did not sincerely believe (for obvious reasons) that capitalism was going through its death throes and would shortly collapse virtually of its own accord. Pannekoek himself did not hold this view, but the relative importance which he attached to conditions of economic breakdown would seem to be accurate. In the concept of revolution as a process, it is the workers' pursuit of their demands which almost inexorably leads them to take measures which are revolutionary. This may be credible during periods of capitalist crisis when it appears as if the working class can only satisfy its most basic demands by completely reorganising society. The Polish workers' struggle, for example, originated from the working class's protests about its inability to obtain one of its most basic material needs – food – but this original issue was soon outstripped as the struggle began to challenge wider and wider aspects of the existing society. However, such deep crises are not a permanent feature of capitalism. There are also periods of boom and relative prosperity for sections of the working class. During such periods there would not appear to be the same potential for the logic of events to lead in a revolutionary direction, for the capitalist system has a greater capacity to satisfy the material demands which workers place upon it. At such times, the conditions which would give rise to a revolutionary struggle and workers' councils would appear to be practically non-existent.

This leads on to the issue of how advocates of the workers' councils should organise themselves during periods when the emergence of workers' councils and revolution do not appear to be immediate prospects. This issue has been a subject of endless debate amongst groups of revolutionaries standing within the council communist tradition. Of the 'theorists' of council communism mentioned so far, Otto Rühle and Herman Gorter held diametrically opposed views on the role of the council communist 'party', while Pannekoek occupied an intermediate position.

Rühle's views on political parties seem to have been shaped decisively by the experience of the mass parliamentary parties of the Second International. His break with the SPD, which he had once represented in the Reichstag, led to an indiscriminate rejection of *all* political parties. In Rühle's view, all political parties were, by definition, 'bourgeois'. In 1924 he wrote that, 'The concept of a party with a revolutionary character in the proletarian sense is nonsense.'<sup>42</sup> At the end of 1920, Rühle's sympathisers dissolved the sections of the KAPD to which they belonged

---

<sup>41</sup> Pannekoek, *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*, in Smart, 1978, p. 94.

<sup>42</sup> Rühle, *From the Bourgeois to the Proletarian Revolution*, p. 26.

into the local factory organisations (part the AAUD). Rühle opposed the separation of economic and political organisation, and favoured a single, 'unitary' revolutionary workplace organisation. To this end he was influential in the formation of a breakaway from the AAUD, called the General Workers' Union of Germany – Unitary Organisation (AAUD-E) in 1921.

The tendency represented by Rühle was opposed vigorously by Gorter, who wrote that 'the factory organisation is not sufficient for the great majority of the proletariat to become conscious, for it to achieve freedom and victory'.<sup>43</sup> The class situation of workers in individual factories might prevent them from having a sufficiently broad over-view of the entire political situation. It was therefore vital for the most advanced and lucid revolutionary workers to form themselves into a separate communist political party, to act as 'the one clear and unflinching compass towards communism' and to 'show the masses the way in all situations, not only in words, but also in deeds'.<sup>44</sup> This party would not seek to seize power itself; Gorter believed strongly in the workers' capacity for self-emancipation, and, indeed, for the reasons he stated in his 'Open Letter' to Lenin, argued that there could be no revolution in Western Europe otherwise. As more and more workers took up communist ideas, the working class, the factory organisations and the party would merge into one entity, united on the same level of class consciousness, and capable of restructuring society.

Pannekoek seems to have vacillated between these two positions without ever settling on one or the other. This is perhaps not surprising given the great length of his period of involvement in revolutionary politics, and the changing objective circumstances in which he put forward his ideas. In 1920 Pannekoek supported a conception of the role of the party similar to Gorter's:

“The function of a revolutionary party lies in propagating clear understanding in advance, so that throughout the masses there will be elements who know what must be done and who are capable of judging the situations for themselves. And in the course of the revolution the party has to raise the programme, slogans and directives which the spontaneously acting masses recognise as correct because they find that they express their own aims in their most adequate form and hence achieve greater clarity of purpose; it is thus that the party comes to lead the struggle.”<sup>45</sup>

In the 1930s, however, Pannekoek swung in the opposite direction, echoing Rühle's equation of all political parties with parties like the SPD: 'The very expression "revolutionary party" is a contradiction in terms'.<sup>46</sup> At this stage Pannekoek defined parties as organisations which sought power for themselves; they were therefore incompatible with working-class self-emancipation. Revolutionaries with similar ideas might come together to discuss and propagandise, and to 'enlighten' the workers through open debate with other groups, but these could not be called 'parties' in the 'old' sense of power-seeking organisations.<sup>47</sup>

Later still, in 1947, Pannekoek seemed to return to his original position, assigning the same functions to organised groups as he did in the 1930s, but upgrading their importance in relation to the actions of the working class as a whole:

---

<sup>43</sup> Herman Gorter, *The Organisation of the Proletariat's Class Struggle* (1921), in Smart, 1978, p. 159.

<sup>44</sup> KAPD, 'Theses on the Party' (July 1921), in *Revolutionary Perspectives*, 2 (no date) p. 72.

<sup>45</sup> Pannekoek, *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*, in Smart, 1978, pp. 100–1.

<sup>46</sup> Anton Pannekoek, 'Partei und Arbeiterklasse', *Rätekorrespondenz*, 15 (March 1936), translated in Bricianer, 1978, p. 265.

<sup>47</sup> See Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. 101.

“The workers’ councils are the organs for practical action and fight of the working class; to the parties falls the task of the building up of its spiritual power. Their work forms an indispensable part in the self-liberation of the working class.”<sup>48</sup>

Council communists have therefore put forward a number of different views on the party issue, ranging from Rühle’s rejection of all parties as inherently ‘bourgeois’ to Gorter’s emphasis on the party’s vital role as ‘the brain of the proletariat, its eye, its steersman’.<sup>49</sup> In general, however, the council communists’ chief focus on the workers’ own councils has assigned the political party to a less central role. The councils are neither created nor controlled by any party. They are the spontaneous and independent creation of the working class in which all workers participate on equal terms.

If this emphasis on working-class autonomy and spontaneity is taken to an absurd extreme, however, it can lead to two dangers: first, the denial of all necessity or reason for any political organisation distinct from the majority of the working class, and, second, the fetishisation of any organisational form created spontaneously and autonomously by the working class. In combination, these dangers amount to what has become known as ‘councillism’, i.e. an empty, *formalistic* emphasis on workers’ councils which completely neglects the communist *content* of the council communist equation.

It is certainly safe to say that capitalism could not be overthrown, nor could a communist society be brought into being, *without* the self-organised activity of the vast majority of the working class. But this *in itself* is not a sufficient condition for the establishment of communism. If the class struggle escalated to a situation in which workers began to take the organisation of society into their own hands, it would seem reasonable to imagine that this would also be accompanied by a corresponding awareness, at the level of political consciousness, of the momentous implications of their actions. But while this may seem *likely*, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that it is far from *inevitable*. Although there is rarely any absolute separation between form and content in the struggles of the working class, neither are there any cast-iron guarantees of the unity of form and content.

It is conceivable that workers could spontaneously take over the means of production at a time of political, social or economic crisis, only to establish a form of self-managed capitalism. (‘Councillists’, in fact, see nothing wrong in this and have applauded the occasions when this actually appears to have happened.) The essential additional condition which must accompany widespread working-class self-organisation is, therefore, widespread communist consciousness. It is from this fact that the vital need arises for council communists to form political organisations of the type described by Gorter and the early Pannekoek, agitating and propagandising on the basis of a commitment to the goal of a non-market socialist society as the only working-class alternative to the existing worldwide capitalist system.

Council communist intervention in the struggles of the working class — participating in, supporting and publicising them, and endeavouring to deepen and extend them — should be informed by the perspective of a commitment to nothing less than the final goal of communism. This means, if needs be, defending the final goal even in opposition to the immediate actions and concerns of the working class, as the KAPD clearly understood:

---

<sup>48</sup> Anton Pannekoek, ‘Five Theses on the Fight of the Working Class Against Capitalism’, in *Southern Advocate for Workers’ Councils* (May 1947), quoted in Bricianer, 1978, p. 267.

<sup>49</sup> Gorter, *The Organisation of the Proletariat’s Class Struggle*, in Smart, 1978, p. 163.



“in the course of the revolution the masses make inevitable vacillations. The communist, party, as the organisation of the most conscious elements, must itself strive not to succumb to these vacillations, but to put them right. Through the clarity and the principled nature of their slogans, the unity of words and deeds, their entry into the struggle, the correctness of their predictions, they must help the proletariat to quickly and completely overcome each vacillation. Through its entire activity the communist party must develop the class consciousness of the proletariat, even at the cost of being momentarily in opposition to the masses. Only thus will the party, in the course of the revolutionary struggle, win the trust of the masses, and accomplish a revolutionary education of the widest numbers.”<sup>50</sup>

It was argued earlier that there is a dialectical relationship between organisation and class consciousness: that new forms of organisation do not arise as a result of shrewd forward planning, but once such new forms have arisen, their example can be spread and exert a conscious influence on the actions of workers in the struggles that take place afterwards. It is as a part of this dialectical process, as a link between the real struggles of the working class and its understanding of all the implications of these struggles, that organised groups of revolutionaries standing in the council communist tradition have their most positive and vital role to play.

---

<sup>50</sup> KAPD, ‘Theses on the Party’, in *Revolutionary Perspectives*, 2, pp. 72–3.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Mark Shipway  
Council Communism  
1987

<https://libcom.org/library/council-communism-mark-shipway-1987>

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**