

John Harper  
Workers Councils  
1936

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1936/councils.htm>

Published: First published in English in the **International Council Correspondence**, Vol.II, No.5, April 1936.

Source: Endpage.com.

Transcription/Markup: Einde O'Callaghan for the **Marxists' Internet Archive**.

Proofreading/Reformatting: Andy Carloff, 2010 (proofreading);  
Micah Muer, 2019 (reformatting).

*Note by Endpage.com:* This article was first published in English in the American journal International Council Correspondence (Vol. II No. 5 April 1936). (Pannekoek wrote a book with this title some years later). The text was published over the initials J.H (John Harper), a pen name Pannekoek often used and the translation may have been by Pannekoek himself. There are a couple of obvious errors in the published text which we have not attempted to correct. The article is in two parts — it would be interesting to know if it was originally two short texts which were then joined together.

**theanarchistlibrary.org**

## Workers Councils

John Harper

1936



# Contents

|         |    |
|---------|----|
| 1. .... | 5  |
| 2. .... | 10 |





## 1.

In its revolutionary struggles, the working class needs organization. When great masses have to act as a unit, a mechanism is needed for understanding and discussion, for the making and issuing of decisions, and for the proclaiming of actions and aims.

This does not mean, of course, that all great actions and universal strikes are carried out with soldierlike discipline, after the decisions of a central board. Such cases will occur, it is true, but more often, through their eager fighting spirit, their solidarity and passion, masses will break out in strikes to help their comrades, or to protest against some capitalist atrocity, with no general plan. Then such a strike will spread like a prairie fire all over the country.

In the first Russian revolution, the strike waves went up and down. Often the most successful were those that had not been decided in advance, while the strikes that had been proclaimed by the central committees often failed.

The strikers, once they are fighting, want mutual contact and understanding in order to unite in an organized force. Here a difficulty presents itself. Without strong organization, without joining forces and binding their will in one solid body, without uniting their action in one common deed, they cannot win against the strong organization of capitalist power. But when thousands and millions of workers are united in one body, this can only be managed by functionaries acting as representatives of the members. And we have seen that then these officials become masters of the organization, with interests different from the revolutionary interests of the workers.

How can the working class, in revolutionary fights, unite its force into a big organization without falling into the pit of officialdom? The answer is given by putting another question: if all that the workers do is to pay their fees and to obey when their leaders order them out and order them in, are they themselves then really fighting their fight for freedom?

Fighting for freedom is not letting your leaders think for you and decide, and following obediently behind them, or from time to time scolding them. Fighting for freedom is partaking to the full of one's capacity, thinking and deciding for oneself, taking all the responsibilities as a self-relying individual amidst equal comrades. It is true that to think for oneself, to think out what is true and right, with a head dulled by fatigue, is the hardest, the most difficult task; it is much harder than to pay and to obey. But it is the only way to freedom. To be liberated by others, whose leadership is the essential part of the liberation, means the getting of new masters instead of the old ones.

Freedom, the goal of the workers, means that they shall be able, man for man, to manage the world, to use and deal with the treasures of the earth, so as to make it a happy home for all. How can they ensure this if they are not able to conquer and defend this themselves?

The proletarian revolution is not simply the vanquishing of capitalist power. It is the rise of the whole working people out of dependence and ignorance into independence and clear consciousness of how to make their life.

True organization, as the workers need it in the revolution, implies that everyone takes part in it, body and soul and brains; that everyone takes part in leadership as well as in action, and has to think out, to decide and to perform to the full of his capacities. Such an organization is a body of self-determining people. There is no place for professional leaders. Certainly there is obeying; everybody has to follow the decisions which he himself has taken part in making. But the full power always rests with the workers themselves.

Can such a form of organization be realized? What must be its structure? It is not necessary to construct it or think it out. History has already produced it. It sprang into life out of the practice of the class struggle. Its prototype, its first trace, is found in the strike committees. In a big strike, all the workers cannot assemble

and takes part in the decisions. Persons, however, who stand outside the process of collective production, are, by the structure of the council system, automatically excluded from influence upon it. Whatever remains of the former exploiters and robbers has no vote in the regulation of a production in which they take no part.

There are other classes in society that do not directly belong to the two chief opposite classes: small farmers, independent artisans, intellectuals. In the revolutionary fight they may waver to and fro, but on the whole they are not very important, because they have less fighting power. Mostly their forms of organization and their aims are different. To make friends with them or to neutralize them, if this is possible without impeding the proper aims or to fight them resolutely if necessary, to decide upon the way of dealing with them with equity and firmness, will be the concern, often a matter of difficult tactics, of the fighting working class. In the production-system, insofar as their work is useful and necessary, they will find their place and they will exert their influence after the principle that whoever does the work has a chief vote in regulating the work.

More than half a century ago, Engels said that through the proletarian revolution the State would disappear; instead of the ruling over men would come the managing of affairs. This was said at a time when there could not be any clear idea about how the working class would come into power. Now we see the truth of this statement confirmed. In the process of revolution, the old State Power will be destroyed, and the organs that take its place, the workers' councils, for the time being, will certainly have important political functions still to repress the remnants of capitalist power. Their political function of governing, however, will be gradually turned into nothing but the economic function of managing the collective process of production of goods for the needs of society.

J.H.

in one meeting. They choose delegates to act as a committee. Such a committee is only the executive organ of the strikers; it is continually in touch with them and has to carry out the decisions of the strikers. Each delegate at every moment can be replaced by others; such a committee never becomes an independent power. In such a way, common action as one body can be secured, and yet the workers have all decisions in their own hands. Usually in strikes, the uppermost lead is taken out of the hands of these committees by the trade unions and their leaders.

In the Russian revolution when strikes broke out irregularly in the factories, the strikers chose delegates which, for the whole town or for an industry or railway over the whole state or province, assembled to bring unity into the fight. They had at once to discuss political matters and to assume political functions because the strikes were directed against Czarism. They were called soviets; councils. In these soviets all the details of the situation, all the workers' interests, all political events were discussed. The delegates went to and fro continually between the assembly and their factories. In the factories and shops the workers, in general meetings, discussed the same matters, took their decisions and often sent new delegates. Able socialists were appointed as secretaries, to give advice based on their wider knowledge. Often these soviets had to act as political powers, as a kind of primitive government when the Czarist power was paralyzed, when officials and officers did not know what to do and left the field to them. Thus these soviets became the permanent center of the revolution; they were constituted by delegates of all the factories, striking or working. They could not think of becoming an independent power. The members were often changed and sometimes the whole soviet was arrested and had to be replaced by new delegates. Moreover they knew that all their force was rooted in the workers will to strike or not to strike; often their calls were not followed when they did not concur with the workers' instinctive feelings of power or weakness, of passion or prudence. So the soviet system proved to be the

appropriate form of organization for a revolutionary working class. In 1917 it was at once adopted in Russia, and everywhere workers, and soldiers' soviets came into being and were the driving force of the revolution.

The complementary proof was given in Germany. In 1918, after the breakdown of the military power, workers' and soldiers' councils in imitation of Russia were founded. But the German workers, educated in party and union discipline, full of social-democratic ideas of republic and reform as the next political aims, chose their party and union-officials as delegates into these councils. When fighting and acting themselves, they acted and fought in the right way, but from lack of self-confidence they chose leaders filled with capitalist ideas, and these always spoilt matters. It is natural that a "council congress" then resolved to abdicate for a new parliament, to be chosen as soon as possible.

Here it became evident that the council system is the appropriate form of organization only for a revolutionary working class. If the workers do not intend to go on with the revolution, they have no use for soviets. If the workers are not far enough advanced yet to see the way of revolution, if they are satisfied with the leaders doing all the work of speechifying and mediating and bargaining for reforms within capitalism, then parliaments and party and union-congresses, – called workers parliaments because they work after the same principle – are all they need. If, however, they fight with all their energy for revolution, if with intense eagerness and passion they take part in every event, if they think over and decide for themselves all details of fighting because they have to do the fighting, then workers' councils are the organization they need.

This implies that workers' councils cannot be formed by revolutionary groups. Such groups can only propagate the idea by explaining to their fellow workers the necessity of council-organization, when the working class as a self-determining power fights for freedom. Councils are the form of organization only

tions by law, necessary conditions, doubtlessly, but of minor extent, could be left to the care of a special group or trade, the politicians. With communist production the reverse is true. Here the all important thing, the collective productive work, is the task of society as a whole; it concerns all the workers collectively. Their personal work does not claim their whole energy and care; their mind is turned to the collective task of society. The general regulation of this collective work cannot be left to a special group of persons; it is the vital interest of the whole working people.

There is another difference between parliamentarism and the soviet system. In parliamentary democracy, one vote is given to every adult man and sometimes woman on the strength of their supreme, inborn right of belonging to mankind, as is so beautifully expressed in celebration speeches. In the soviets, on the other hand, only the workers are represented. Can the council system then be said to be truly democratic if it excludes the other classes of society?

The council system embodies the dictatorship of the proletariat. Marx and Engels, more than half a century ago, explained that the social revolution was to lead to the dictatorship of the working class as the next political form and that this was essential in order to bring about the necessary changes in society. Socialists, thinking in terms of parliamentary representation only, tried to excuse or to criticize the violation of democracy and the injustice of arbitrarily excluding persons from the polls because they belong to certain classes. Now we see how the development of the proletarian class struggle in a natural way produces the organs of this dictatorship, the soviets.

It is certainly no violation of justice that the councils, as the fighting centers of a revolutionary working class, do not include representatives of the opposing class. And thereafter the matter is not different. In a rising communist society there is no place for capitalists; they have to disappear and they will disappear. Whoever takes part in the collective work is a member of the collectivity



work, and its workers must decide what they collectively have to do. So the organization and delegation of workers in factories and workshops is the necessary form.

It is at the same time the principle of representation of the communist order growing up in the revolution. Production is the basis of society, or, more rightly, it is the contents, the essence of society; hence the order of production is at the same time the order of society. Factories are the working units, the cells of which the organism of society consists. The main task of the political organs, which mean nothing else but the organs managing the totality of society, concerns the productive work of society. Hence it goes without saying that the working people, in their councils, discuss these matters and choose their delegates, collected in their production units.

We should not believe, though, that parliamentarism, as the political form of capitalism, was not founded on production. Always the political organization is adapted to the character of production as the basis of society. Representation, according to dwelling place, belongs to the system of petty capitalist production, where each man is supposed to be the possessor of his own small business. Then there is a mutual connection between all these businessmen at one place, dealing with one another, living as neighbors, knowing one another and therefore sending one common delegate to parliament. This was the basis of parliamentarism. We have seen that later on this parliamentary delegation system proved to be the right system for representing the growing and changing class interests within capitalism.

At the same time it is clear now why the delegates in parliament had to take political power in their hands. Their political task was only a small part of the task of society. The most important part, the productive work, was the personal task of all the separate producers, the citizens as business men; it required nearly all their energy and care. When every individual took care of his own small lot, then society as their totality went right. The general regula-

for fighting masses, for the working class as a whole, not for revolutionary groups.

They originate and grow up along with the first action of a revolutionary character. With the development of revolution, their importance and their functions increase. At first they may appear as simple strike committees, in opposition to the labor leaders when the strikes go beyond the intentions of the leaders, and rebel against the unions and their leaders.

In a universal strike the functions of these committees are enlarged. Now delegates of all the factories and plants have to discuss and to decide about all the conditions of the fight; they will try to regulate into consciously devised actions all the fighting power of the workers; they must see how they will react upon the governments' measures, the doings of soldiers or capitalist gangs. By means of this very strike action, the actual decisions are made by the workers themselves. In the councils, the opinions, the will, the readiness, the hesitation, or the eagerness, the energy and the obstacles of all these masses concentrate and combine into a common line of action. They are the symbols, the exponents of the workers' power; but at the same time they are only the spokesmen who can be replaced at any moment. At one time they are outlaws to the capitalist world, and at the next, they have to deal as equal parties with the high functionaries of government.

When the revolution develops to such power that the State power is seriously affected, then the workers' councils have to assume political functions. In a political revolution, this is their first and chief function. They are the central bodies of the workers' power; they have to take all measures to weaken and defeat the adversary. Like a power at war, they have to stand guard over the whole country, controlling the efforts of the capitalist class to collect and restore their forces and to subdue the workers. They have to look after a number of public affairs which otherwise were state affairs : public health, public security, and the uninterrupted course of social life. They have to take care of the production itself;

the most important and difficult task and concern of the working class in revolution.

A social revolution in history never began as a simple change of political rulers who then, after having acquired political power, carried out the necessary social changes by means of new laws. Already, before and during the fight, the rising class built up its new social organs as new sprouting branches within the dead husk of the former organism. In the French revolution, the new capitalist class, the citizens, the business men, the artisans, built up in each town and village their communal boards, their new courts of justice, illegal at the time, usurping simply the functions of the powerless functionaries of royalty. While their delegates in Paris discussed and made the new constitution, the actual constitution was made all over the country by the citizens holding their political meetings, building up their political organs afterwards legalized by law.

In the same way during the proletarian revolution, the new rising class creates its new forms of organization which step by step in the process of revolution supersede the old State organization. The workers' councils, as the new form of political organization, take the place of parliamentarism, the political form of capitalist rule.

## 2.

Parliamentary democracy is considered by capitalist theorists as well as by social-democrats as the perfect democracy, conform to justice and equality. In reality, it is only a disguise for capitalist domination, and contrary to justice and equality. It is the council system that is the true workers' democracy.

Parliamentary democracy is foul democracy. The people are allowed to vote once in four or five years and to choose their delegates; woe to them if they do not choose the right man. Only

at the polls the voters can exert their power; thereafter they are powerless. The chosen delegates are now the rulers of the people; they make laws and constitute governments, and the people have to obey. Usually, by the election mechanism, only the big capitalist parties with their powerful apparatus, with their papers, their noisy advertising, have a chance to win. Real trustees of discontented groups seldom have a chance to win some few seats.

In the soviet system, each delegate can be repealed at any moment. Not only do the workers continually remain in touch with the delegate, discussing and deciding for themselves, but the delegate is only a temporary messenger to the council assemblies. Capitalist politicians denounce this "characterless" role of the delegate, in that he may have to speak against his personal opinion. They forget that just because there are no fixed delegates, only those will be sent whose opinions conform to those of the workers.

The principle of parliamentary representation is that the delegate in parliament shall act and vote according to his own conscience and conviction. If on some question he should ask the opinion of his voters, it is only due to his own prudence. Not the people, but he on his own responsibility has to decide. The principle of the soviet system is just the reverse; the delegates only express the opinions of the workers.

In the elections for parliament, the citizens are grouped according to voting districts and counties; that is to say according to their dwelling place. Persons of different trades or classes, having nothing in common, accidentally living near one another, are combined into an artificial group which has to be represented by one delegate.

In the councils, the workers are represented in their natural groups, according to factories, shops and plants. The workers of one factory or one big plant form a unit of production; they belong together by their collective work. In revolutionary epochs, they are in immediate contact to interchange opinions; they live under the same conditions and have the same interests. They must act together; the factory is the unit which as a unit has to strike or to