

The Hungarian Revolution 1956

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1984

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Before October...

“It’s all a load of shit, that’s what it is!”¹ This accurate description of Hungarian socialism in the early ‘fifties came from a worker in prison, overheard by a Communist intellectual locked up during a purge. This rare contact with a worker, and even rarer contact with what workers thought of the ‘workers’ state* helped this particular intellectual to lose his “faith in Marxism”. As the saying went about prisons in Hungary, “We are a three-class society – those who have been there, those who axe there, and those who are heading there.” The large number of workers in prison, either for political offences or for theft, showed up the system: even Imre Nagy, the watered-down Stalinist entrusted by Moscow in 1953 to liberalise Hungary (that is, to hold the workers in check) had to admit by December 1955 that “the most alarming fact is that the majority of those convicted are industrial workers”.²

Theft was a necessity for workers to compensate for socialist living standards. These had dropped by 17–20% in the years 1949–53 as a result of an idiotic ‘Five-Year Plan’ devoted to heavy industry and steelworks in a largely agricultural country with no iron ore or coking coal.³ Similarly, the imposition of co-operatives on unwilling peasants led to a fall in their meagre incomes, and 1952 saw the worst ever yields in Hungarian agriculture. Official statistics revealed that while 15% of the population was above the ‘minimum* standard of living, 30% were on it and 55% below. A day’s pay for a state farm worker wouldn’t buy a kilo of bread; in 15% of working-class families not everyone had a blanket; one in every five workers had no winter coat.⁴

In these conditions, thieving from the state and ‘beating the system* were the things to do to survive. No moral stigma attached to them at all, rather, everyone was at it to relieve their poverty. Pilfering and spontaneous sabotage went together with high labour turnover (often as local managements got rid of ‘troublemakers’), waste in factories, futile planning and falsified output figures to meet ridiculous production targets. Workers had to do unpaid overtime to ‘celebrate’ anniversaries that the Party of Hungarian Workers (MDP) designated as great occasions. Home businesses thrived on materials taken from work; copper was stolen from shipyards; a buyer at a Budapest hospital complained “Nowadays even nailing it down is no guarantee against theft”. In the state stores, staff would cheat customers and sell short weight, except to relatives and friends. Butter was rarely seen in shops as it was prepacked and weighed, it offered no scope for fiddling, and so wasn’t ordered much by shops.

Workers and peasants went beyond theft, absenteeism and what the MDP leadership liked to call ‘laziness’ and ‘wage-swindling’. The third banner in the official procession on May Day 1953 proclaimed “Glory to the immortal Stalin, star which guides us towards freedom, socialism and peace”. Seven weeks later the workers of East Berlin rioted for their vision of freedom and were quickly put down by Russian tanks. 20,000 workers went on strike at the Rakosi iron and steel works in Budapest’s Csepel district against low pay, production norms and food shortages. There

¹ Bill Lomax: *The Working Class in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956* in ‘Critique’ No 12, Autumn 1979/Winter 1980, Pp 27–54 (referred to as Critique from now on). The quote is taken from one of the interviews of the Columbia University Research Project on Hungary. The interviews are widely used in many of the books on the revolution: all unattributed quotes from now on come from them. To list them all would be tedious and take too much space*

² quoted in Critique p33.

³ Molnar, pp19-29.

⁴ Critique, p33.

were wildcat strikes in Diosgyor, and mass peasant demonstrations in the countryside. To avoid further outbreaks, Russia ordered a change of leadership and a change of policy.

Matyas Rakosi, who styled himself “Stalin’s Hungarian disciple” but was more popularly referred to as ‘arsehole’ by Hungarian workers, was required to make way for Imre Nagy, who had managed not to be involved in the purges and generalised terror of the late ‘forties. His ‘new course’ outlined in late June 1953 was designed to ease the load on the workers and peasants, produce higher living standards, end the internment camps and turn the economy away from heavy industry. Because he was opposed by the hard-line Stalinists around Rakosi and Brno Cero, Nagy is presented by some as popular and liberal. In fact he was much like the rest. After Stalin’s death, he talked of him as the “great leader of all humanity”; the whole Stalinist era was a period of “trial and error”. In late 1954 Nagy felt able to say “We have created a new country, and a happy and free life for the people”; meanwhile Rakosi and Gero argued that workers’ living standards were too high.

Although Nagy may have felt that the removal of some of Stalinism’s worst features constituted a ‘free life’, his ‘liberalism’ was met by even more absenteeism, indiscipline and slacking by workers. A typical Nagy speech from that period shows why. “The production results of the third quarter show that, if the labour drive to mark these elections is carried out with the same enthusiasm and vigour as the revolutionary shift that was worked in honour of the Great Socialist October Revolution, and if management and workers can get the same improvement in worker discipline — in which there are still grave deficiencies — as in production, then MAVAG will be able to take its place amongst the ranks of the elite plants.”⁵ No amount of apologetics can cover up the straightforward capitalist content of such a speech.

Workers’ cynicism spread outside the workplace: in 1954 there were three days of rioting after the World Cup final defeat by West Germany in the belief that the game had been thrown for hard currency. Games of any kind against Russia were rarely without trouble. The MDP sent intellectuals and writers out into the country at large during 1953 to explain Nagy’s ‘new course’: for most it was a first sight of the miserable conditions of the peasants and workers. They soon found out that the ‘toiling masses’ had little time for the Literary Gazette or for ‘building socialism’. A young Communist commented “The workers hated the regime to such an extent that by 1953 they were ready to destroy it and everything that went with it.”

Workers expressed this themselves: “The workers did not believe in anything the communists promised them, because the communists had cheated their promises so often.” A worker from the Red Star Tractor factory: “Under Communism, we should have a share in governing Hungary, but instead we’re the poorest people in the country. We’re just regarded as factory fodder.” Another worker: “The Communists nationalised all the factories and similar enterprises, proclaiming the slogan, ‘The factory is yours — you work for yourself.’ Exactly the opposite of this was true.”

Among the students the peasants’ and workers’ sons were most prepared to speak their minds. They were more insolent than the middle-class ones. They were also less likely to engage in abstract ideological discussions but stuck to concrete issues — like food shortages. Disillusion and anti-communism were widespread amongst Hungarian youth. “We spoke less about political subjects, but if we did, we were cursing the Russians, that was most of the time what it amounted

⁵ quoted in David Irving: *Uprising*, Hodder & Stoughton 1981, p140. In general a book to be wary of, Irving being every bit as hostile to the working class as he is to official Communism: he is the historian who ‘proved’ Hitler was ‘innocent’.

to.” “We were the first generation that was not scared. After all we had nothing to lose and we also had the feeling that we couldn’t bear this for an entire life.”

Discontent and workers’ opposition thus existed long before 1956. However, the American assessment in December 1953 by an army attaché was that “There are no organised resistance groups in Hungary; the population does not now, nor will they in the future, have the capacity to resist actively the present regime;”. With a similar attitude, the Russian leader Krushchev thought that if he’d had ten Hungarian writers shot at the right moment, nothing would have happened. A week before the revolt a reader’s letter to the Literary Gazette complained about the uselessness of the intellectuals’ debates: “The working class is, and will remain, politically passive for good, and uninterested in such hair-splitting...and without them what good can we do?”⁶ However, a Yugoslavian political analyst was more perceptive, commenting nine days before the uprising, “People refuse to live in the old way, nor can the leadership govern in the old way. Conditions have been created for an uprising.” The AVH (‘Allamvedelmi Hatosag’, State Security Force) sensed trouble too they and the Russian troops garrisoned in Hungary were put on alert five days before October 23rd.

Much has been made of the dissatisfaction of Communist writers and intellectuals and their supposed leading role in the revolution. The intellectuals’ programme was only a criticism of Stalinism. Their ‘Petofi Circle’ debating club wanted orderly reform and a change in the leadership (because the Stalinists Rakosi and Gero had returned to power replacing Nagy, now out of public life altogether). The Petofi Circle did not encourage the revolt: it considered that precipitate actions could lead to a catastrophe. They were seen by workers as Communists and supporters of the regime. Nagy became a focus for this kind of ‘opposition’, which favoured working through MDP channels, and was certainly against demonstrations. Most of these people came out against the uprising: two such journalists thought that the crowds behaved “like idiots” on October 23rd. One writer though, Gyula Hay, was honest enough to see who was stirring up who: “I am perfectly willing to accept that it was not I who awoke the spirit of freedom in youth: on the contrary, it was youth who pushed me towards it.” Workers started to take an interest in what the writers were getting up to in mid-September 1956, when a meeting of the Writers’ Union saw the Stalinists defeated in elections. A Literary Gazette account of that meeting sold 70,000 copies in half an hour. Such a rebuff to the authorities was bound to be of interest now.

The occasion of the reburial of a rehabilitated Communist, Laszlo Rajk, a victim of an earlier purge, was used by workers to demonstrate en masse. Some 200,000 attended in the rain on October 6th: an observer commented “perhaps if it had not rained, there would have been a revolution that day.” There had been no difference between Rajk and Rakosi politically, personal rivalry resulting in Rajk’s trial and execution as a ‘Titoist fascist’. The workers’ ‘support’ for Rajk’s rehabilitation was purely symbolic: on the other side of the coin, a top Communist said that “if Rajk could have seen this mob he would have turned machine guns on to them.” The same day 2–300 students marched away after the burial using the slogan, “We won’t stop halfway, Stalinism must be destroyed” Despite shouting this, the students weren’t stopped by the police, who assumed that any kind of demonstration must be an official one.

⁶ quoted in Perenc Feher & Agnes Heller: Hungary 1956 Revisited, George Allen & Unwin 1983.

October 23rd

It was the students who were responsible for the event that sparked off the inevitable. On October 16th students in Szegeed had broken away from the official organisation and set up a new association. They sent delegates countrywide to encourage similar breaks. By the 22nd there were similar groups in most of the universities and large schools. News had reached Budapest of events in Poland, where the Soviet army had encircled Warsaw as the Polish Communist Party changed its leadership under pressure from below. A meeting at the Polytechnic in Budapest resolved to march on the 23rd in support of sixteen demands. These included support for the Polish struggle for freedom; the removal of Soviet troops; the election of MDP officials; a new government under Imre Nagy; a general election; “the complete reorganisation of Hungary’s economic life under the direction of specialists”; the right to strike; the “complete revision of the norms in effect in industry and an immediate and radical adjustment of salaries in accordance with the just requirements of workers and intellectuals”; and a free press and radio.⁷

This mixed bag of demands could not even have begun to be met by the regime — therein lay its explosive potential. Yet underlying the demands was the all-too-common illusion that what had been mismanaged by ‘bad’ leaders could be rectified by ‘good’ leaders elected to replace them. The element of naivety was compounded by the way the students asked workers for support but not for them to strike; they wanted a silent march only. The Interior Ministry banned the march, which made more people resolve to go. The ban was lifted after the march went ahead anyway. Although the march started silently as the students wished, it became more militant as workers off the morning shift joined in after 4 o’clock. The early slogans of support for the Poles were overtaken by shouts for freedom and “Russians go home.” Someone cut the communist symbol out of a national flag and the flag of the revolution made its first appearance — red, white and green with a hole in the middle. More people left work to join a demonstration that they weren’t forced to take part in; soldiers were sympathetic and joined in too.

By dusk there were 200,000 people (about one-sixth of the v/hole population of Budapest) in Parliament Square. The authorities turned off the lights, whereupon newspapers and government leaflets were set alight. The crowd demanded that Imre Nagy speak to them, but by the time he turned up the mood had gone beyond listening calmly to speeches. Appalled by the sight of so many people and by the flags with holes, Nagy made the mistake of starting with the word ‘Comrades!’ This was greeted with boos and shouts of “We’re no longer comrades!” The people had already rejected the whole HDP, not just the Stalinists the ‘oppositionists’ were too moderate. The disappointment with Hagy turned into positive talk of a strike, and a crowd of youths marched to the Radio building.

At 8 o’clock there was an official broadcast by Erno Gero in which he said: “We condemn those who seek to instill in our youth the poison of chauvinism and to take advantage of the democratic liberties that our state guarantees to the workers to organise a nationalist demonstration.”⁸ This did nothing to calm the situation. The crowd outside the Radio demanded access, with microphones in the street “so that the people can express their opinions.” A delegation was taken in by the AVH to the Radio boss, Mrs Benke: she checked their ID cards and found they were workers from the long machinery plant and an arms factory. Similarly, Kopacsi, the Budapest

⁷ Molnar, pp108-9, Meray pp6,7-8.

⁸ Molnar, p144.

police chief, questioned some youths picked up on the demonstration and discovered they were factory workers, some with Party cards.

When the delegation failed to reappear, the Radio building was attacked and defended: at about 9 o'clock the first shots were fired with many dead and wounded. The crowd had got weapons from sympathetic police and soldiers before the AVH's first shots, and as the news spread, workers from the arsenals brought more. The revolution had now started in earnest. An observer felt that "it was at Stalin's statue that the workers of Budapest appeared on the scene." When the crowd had trouble getting it down, two workers fetched oxy-acetylene gear to cut it down. The boots remained on the plinth, with a road sign saying 'Bead End' stuck on them. Hungarian troops were greeted as friends and allies by the crowds; workers were arriving from Csepel in lorries with ammunition. Arms factories were raided and the telephone exchange taken.

The authorities called on the sappers in a nearby barracks, and told them that fascists had risen against the government. The sappers were met by workers who told them the truth. More sappers arrived to defend the HDF's Central Committee HQ. When they saw, for the first time, the luxury of the accommodation there, and realised that the crowds were ordinary Hungarians, they went back to their barracks, changed out of uniform and elected a revolutionary council. By midnight 'spectators' were leaving the scene and the armed workers of Csepel and Ujpest were taking their place. The battle for the Radio building went on all night: it was finally taken at nine in the morning.

The mass, revolutionary character of the Hungarian uprising "was established within hours. "The Hungarian uprising was the personal experience of millions of men and women, and therefore of no one in particular, just like the Paris Commune or other mass revolts." 9 The casualty lists in the hospitals showed that it was young workers in particular who did most of the fighting. A doctor commented! "There was any number of youngsters amongst the fighters who knew nothing about the Petofi Circle or who for that matter hadn't even heard of it, to whom Gomulka's name was equally unknown, and who replied to the question as to why they had risked their lives in the fighting with such answers as, 'Well, is it really worth living for 600 forints a month?'" A student noticed the same thing: "It is touching that it was the hooligans of Ferencvaros who created ethics out of nothing during the revolution."

The participants knew why they were fighting: "We wanted freedom and not a good comfortable life. Even though we might lack bread and other necessities of life, we wanted freedom. We, the young people, were particularly hampered because we were brought up amidst lies. We continually had to lie." The character of the uprising was distinctive in that it had a clear direction without a 'leadership*'. The United Nations Committee investigating it was told by a Hungarian professor of philosophy, "It was unique in history that the Hungarian revolution had no leaders. It was not organised; it was not centrally directed. The will for freedom was the moving force in every action." The same point is well made by two fighters: "There was no organisation whatsoever, consequently there was no discipline either, but there was astonishingly good teamwork." "Some people got together, fought, went home, then others came and continued the fight."

The first tasks of the rebels involved seizing the telephone exchanges, requisitioning lorries, attacking garages, barracks and arsenals, getting arms and ammunition above all else. Then barricades and molotov cocktails were made to face the Soviet tanks that entered Budapest shortly after four in the morning of the 24th. Russian troops had moved into action before the Hungarian authorities, in emergency meetings all night, called for their 'fraternal' assistance. Some 'barricades were made of paving stones ripped up by hand by women and children. The rebels took

up positions in narrow streets and passages. Those in the Corvin Passage made their stand by a convenient petrol pump. As dawn broke, workers in Calvin Square confronted five tanks without running away. Public support was immediate, with armed rebels having no trouble getting food and shelter. Soldiers, when not taking part in the fighting themselves, handed arms over to the rebels.

Thirteen days in Budapest...

First reactions to events were starting to come out. The Stalinists called the revolt “a fascist counter-revolutionary action.” The ‘moderate’ Communists wanted Nagy, but both wanted order restored, by Russian troops if necessary. The writers’ role was over already, their demands surpassed. The students too were having second thoughts about what they had sparked off. Very few people went to work on the 24th. At 4.30 am an official announcement banned all demonstrations and referred to “fascist and reactionary elements”. Just after 8 o’clock, Nagy was declared Prime Minister: fifteen hours earlier the appointment might have had some effect but from now on the authorities’ moves were way behind the developing events. Half an hour later Nagy showed what ‘liberal’, ‘moderate’ Communism was about: he declared martial law with the death penalty for carrying arms, and his government called in the Soviet troops. After this, his programme was of little interest to the rebels.

The intervention by the Soviet troops now gave the revolt a national character. The attitude of sympathetic neutrality that the Hungarian army had taken in the first few hours was now replaced by and large by one of active support for the rebellion. Soviet tanks were being immobilised by the fighting youth, who, though poorly armed, were using the partisan techniques drummed into them at school in praise of the Soviet resistance to the German armies in World War Two. This was a rare case of Hungarians eager to learn from Russian example. Anti-tank tactics included loosening the cobblestones, then soaping the road, or pouring oil over it. Liquid soap was used in Moricz Zsigmond Square. In Szena Square bales of silk taken from a Party shop were spread out and covered with oil. The Soviet tanks couldn’t move on this and became sitting targets for petrol bombs. Youngsters would run up and smear jam over the driver’s window; some rebels blew themselves up knowingly getting close enough to a tank to destroy it.

A thirteen year old girl was seen taking on a 75 ton tank with three bottle bombs. A Viennese reporter at the Kilian Barracks met another 13 year old who had defended a street crossing alone with a machine-gun for three days and nights. “The Russians found themselves faced by hordes of death-defying youngsters: students, apprentices and even schoolchildren who did not care whether they lived or died.” A Swiss reporter, seeing children fighting and dying, wrote: “If ever the time comes to commemorate the heroes in Hungary, they mustn’t forget to raise a monument to the Unknown Hungarian Child.” A chemical engineer saw some children with empty bottles. He told them to use nitro-glycerin rather than petrol, so they all went to their school laboratory where he helped them to synthesise enough nitro-glycerin to make a hundred bottle bombs. Then he went home and left them to it. Twelve year olds learnt how to handle guns: older men instructed rebels in the use of grenades and how to attack tanks.

An air force officer typed out copies of guerrilla tactics. Many of the carefully selected and supposedly politically indoctrinated officer corps went over to the rebels. Officers of the Petofi and Zrinyi Military Academies, the future elite, fought the Russians. After the rebellion the army

was reorganised with many officers and cadets got rid of. The police were generally sympathetic. Only the AVH fought alongside the Russians. The AVH (referred to by workers as 'the Blues' or 'the AVOs', the name they had before 1949) had some 35,000 men and women, the latter being reputedly the worse torturers. Their minimum pay was over three times that of a worker, plus bonuses. They had their own subsidised stores and a holiday village by Lake Balaton. Many Hungarians had experienced 'esengofraz', namely 'bell-fever', a midnight call by the AVH. Now it was the turn of the AVOs to be hunted. "The security forces were capable of terrorisation in times of peace, or of firing on an unarmed crowd, but impotent in the face of a people's uprising."⁹

The AVH was abolished on the afternoon of October 29th, to be resurrected after the Russian invasion. Since the 21st, two days before the uprising, the AVH had been destroying its files. Neither of these things saved individual AVOs from lynchings: such killings were generally carried out in a purposeful and sombre manner. Without any doubt, the AVH killed many more people over the years than the crowds managed to kill of them. Despite this and the AVH's continued brutality during the revolution, most insurgents condemned the lynchings. In the work of creating a new society, such imitations of the old were unwelcome. However, no one was sorry for the dead AVOs: as a Hungarian told a Polish reporter "Believe me, we are not sadists, but we cannot bring ourselves to regret those kind of people."¹⁰ In the streets bodies of AVOs lay or hung with the money found in their pockets either stuffed in their mouths or pinned to their chests. Even in poverty, no self-respecting Hungarian would touch it. After the rebellion was crushed, the Hungarian authorities themselves put the total number of security force members killed as 234 – a remarkably low figure in the circumstances.

The crowds got on with removing symbols of the old regime: red stars were torn down. At the offices of Szabad Nep, the MDP newspaper, journalists threw down leaflets of support for the revolt out of the windows: people tore them up and burnt them without reading them -after all their years of lying, no one was going to believe them now. The Party bookshop and the Soviet 'Horizont' bookshop were ransacked and the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin piled up and set alight. A general strike spread over the country, a move which left the MDP embarrassed. So often it had praised the strikes of Western workers, now Hungarian workers were doing the same – but this time against them. Fighting was fierce in Parliament Square and at the Party HQ after AVH units fired on largely unarmed crowds. Black flags made their first appearances to mourn fallen rebels. Radio Budapest, still in the hands of the authorities, threatened: "If the destructions and assassinations continue, the football match between Hungary and Sweden, scheduled for Sunday, will have to be cancelled."¹¹ This radio station was now only listened to for laughs, as its statements bore no relation to observable reality. The fighting groups continued to form throughout the city. The armed group holding Szena Square held open democratic meetings to discuss strategy and tactics.

On the 25th the Government urged a return to work in its radio broadcasts. This call was ignored, but as it implied an end to the curfew (which had also been widely ignored anyway) many thousands more took to the streets to find out what was going on and to discuss events: going to work was the last thing on most people's minds, Nagy's reshuffles of his ministers, his 'concessions' and announcements were increasingly irrelevant and always too slow and too late

⁹ Molnar, p144.

¹⁰ Eyewitness, p125

¹¹ Meray, p102.

to satisfy the rebels. The people in the streets didn't give a damn that Georgy Lukacs, a darling of leftist academics, was now in the cabinet. On the 26th Lukacs said in a radio broadcast that "what we want is a socialist culture worthy of the Hungarian people's great and ancient achievements", while all around people were dismantling all the 'socialist culture' they could find.

The writers were giving up quickly. Gabor Tanesos said no progress (whatever it was he had in mind) could be made "while the guns are roaring." As early as the 25th, Gyula Hay stated "We must immediately revert to peaceful methods; fighting must stop immediately. Even peaceful demonstrations should not now be undertaken."¹² While the intellectuals were way behind the workers, lacking their basic intransigence, not all were so craven. On the 29th some told Nagy to arm the workers. He shrank back from such a suggestion, replying that "At present that is quite impossible. A lot of the workers are unreliable" At times it seemed that Nagy had lost touch with the reality of what was happening's in a speech he referred to the "historic, durable, and ineffaceable" results of twelve years of Communist rule! The KDP's plight now was of no consequence — the rebels had rejected it. On the basis of their own direct experience, Bulgarians were exposing the sham of the 'socialist states'.

The call for the Russians to leave was an expression of this. The fighting between the rebels and the Russians did not however have the bitterness that the clashes with the AVH had. Ho Soviet soldiers were lynched, none of their corpses were mutilated, and on the other side there was no vindictiveness shown towards the rebels by the Russians. The Red Army soldiers were not keen to be shot at, nor were they eager to shoot at a population they had been peaceably stationed amongst for some time. There were some desertions, particularly among members of the Soviet Union's national minorities. One example was an Armenian major who went over to the rebels on the 24th and distributed leaflets to Soviet troops urging them not to fire. Some rebels too disliked fighting the Russians. One fighter commented "I found myself shooting at bewildered Ukrainian peasant boys who had as much reason to hate what we fought as we had... It was an embittering shock to find that one can't confront the real enemy even in a revolution. "

While the rebels struggled to confront and defeat the real enemy, victims of the old regime were being set free. On the 26th the police building in Csepel was stormed and its prisoners released. Thousands were let out of forced labour camps and some 17,000 from the country's prisons. The most common crime was petty theft. Police chief Kopacsi allowed all political prisoners and those fighters held from the first day or so's fighting out of the City Police HQ in Budapest. This act was to cost him a life sentence in 1958. As the fighting continued, with most damage occurring in the working-class suburbs of Budapest and the industrial towns, the country's farmers worked to provide food for the rebels, and lorries with bread, flour and vegetables streamed into the towns. Bakers worked throughout the rebellion and strike to ensure that rebels and strikers were fed.

Despite hunger and poverty there was an absence of looting in the city. Shops with broken windows had their goods left intact. After the radio and the Soviet press talked of looting, signs were put up on such shops saying, "This is how we loot." Another popular slogan dated back to the Korean War when the Federation of Working Youth collected metal for the Horth Korean war effort: "Scrap Metals Ensure Peace!" now made a more appropriate reappearance on burnt-out Soviet tanks. Some North Korean students (and some Polish ones) returned the favour by joining the rebels.

¹² Lomax, p138.

The collapse of the MDP and the unity of industrial workers, peasants and white-collar workers left the Government powerless by the 27th. Real power was moving towards the revolutionary workers' councils. It was these councils that called the strike, and the workers obeyed this call because it came in effect from themselves. Similarly, the call for a return to work was accepted when the councils made it. The Communists had said that workers were the ruling class, now, through the councils, the workers were putting it into practice. As the workers' councils spread from factory to factory and district to district the National Trade Union Council, realising that it was being made redundant, tried to pre-empt developments by advocating workers' councils, but with its own old hacks on the platform. Workers still turned up to such meetings, but elected from among themselves, rejecting the trade union officials. MDP members were then urged to infiltrate the genuine councils. A paper called 'Igazsag' ('Truth') was started, which kept in touch with the councils. Delegations from the councils besieged Nagy's government with endless demands. Two recurrent demands were for Hungarian neutrality and withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact.

Among Hungary's Warsaw Pact allies, the Czech, East German and Rumanian Communist Parties were particularly virulent in their condemnations of the 'counter-revolution'. This was motivated by the fear that their own working classes might choose to settle accounts with them. Russia itself, while getting more troops into Hungary ready for the second assault on the workers, chose to make an official declaration on relations between socialist states. Its high-sounding phrases were of course meaningless, but it also contained an 'analysis' of events in order to justify the approaching repression. Russia's view was that "the workers of Hungary have, after achieving great progress on the basis of the people's democratic order, justifiably raised the questions of the need for eliminating the serious inadequacies of the economic system, of the need for further improving the material well-being of the people, and of the need for furthering the battle against bureaucratic excesses in the state apparatus. However, the forces of reaction and of counter-revolution have quickly joined in this just and progressive movement of the workers, with the aim of using the discontent of the workers to undermine the foundations of the people's democratic system in Hungary and to restore to power the landlords and the capitalists."¹³ For sheer drivel this was hard to beat: the workers and peasants were fighting to eliminate the economic system itself and destroy the state apparatus; the only 'counter-revolutionary force' involved was the Soviet Union itself and its Hungarian supporters in the MDP.

The rebels were quite emphatically not for the restoration of capitalism, nor were the political parties, which were re-emerging. Smallholders Party leader Bela Kovacs was clear: "No one, I believe, wants to re-establish the world of the aristocrats, the bankers and the capitalists. That world is definitely gone." Likewise National Peasants Party leader Ferenc Farkas: "We shall retain the gains and conquests of socialism..." Even Catholic Party leader Endre Varga saw no point in trying to turn back the clock — "We demand the maintenance of the social victories which have been realised since 1945..."¹⁴ People were worried that the reappearance of these old parties would undermine the unity of the revolution, but the hatred of the one-party system was such as to tolerate them: demands for parties to be allowed was not though an expression of any great enthusiasm for them. Despite the MDP's record in power, no worker wanted private capitalists back: they wanted their supposed collective property to become theirs in fact. No peasant wanted the private landlords back -but they wanted the co-operatives to be voluntary rather than forced.

¹³ Meray, P147.

¹⁴ Meray, p173-5.

As the Party collapsed, members burnt their cards. One member stuck his to a wall with a message next to it — “A testimony to my stupidity. Let this be a lesson to you.” The MDP reorganised itself as the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (MSzMP).

Of the twenty or more new papers that appeared within days of the uprising none were right wing. One that tried to publish found the compositors refusing to touch it. The papers were usually four pages or a single sheet, either printed or stencilled. ‘Igazsag’ proved the most popular, as it was closest to the workers’ councils. Walls were covered with copies of the papers and other notices. Accounts of MDP leaders’ lifestyles made popular reading. There was very little nationalism, and no anti-Semitism. Soviet armoured cars distributed the Party paper, but people tore the bundles to bits without any regard for the contents. As the Russian troops dug in round Budapest, boxes were left in the streets to collect for widows and orphans. No one needed to guard these boxes full of money. A notice next to one said “The purity of our revolution permits us to use this method of collection. “ The mayor of the capital, Jozsef Kovago, said the city was “pervaded with such sacred feelings that even the thieves abandoned their trade.” On the wreck of a Russian tank someone scrawled the words ‘Soviet culture’. A girl fighter in the Corvin Passage spoke for thousands: “Now I’m making history instead of studying it.”

...and in the country

Hungarians were not just making history in Budapest. In the country districts and industrial towns, workers and peasants were quick to follow up the events in the capital. On the 23rd October itself in Debrecen, red stars were already being taken off buildings and local trams. In Szeged, crowds tore down Soviet emblems. In Miskolc, some Russians were attacked and an army staff car thrown in the river. The police were disarmed in Cegled when some 5,000 joined the uprising. The removal of Soviet troops from Hungarian soil was demanded by oil workers in Lovasz, miners from Balinka and auto repair workers in Szombathely. Everywhere workers were finding their voices and taking action.

In Gyor on the 24th a small demonstration of factory workers ripped red stars off the factories and destroyed a Soviet war memorial. They broke down the prison gates and released political prisoners. They found a list of the prisoners’ occupations — driver’s, workers, waiters and mechanics. The AVH turned up and fired at the crowds, killing four and wounding more. The next day the local police and army garrison joined the revolution, forcing the surrender, of the AVH. The local Soviet commander withdrew his troops saying that the rising “against the oppressive leaders is justified”. On the 26th a general strike got under way, and by the next day a Workers’ Council and a ‘National Revolutionary Council* had ‘been set up (‘National’ referring to the local county, not the whole of Hungary), composed in the main of workers with some MDP members. These councils were in constant session. They were both insurrectionary and self-governing. The local radio was in rebel hands, and on the 28th it called for an end to the Warsaw Pact and demanded that Imre Nagy negotiate with the Budapest workers. Thirty thousand miners struck for these demands. A network of local workers’ councils developed, linking the railway works with the miners of Tatabanya and Balinka. Personnel chiefs were dismissed and new plant managers elected by workforces. The national Revolutionary Council successfully repulsed efforts by a handful of reactionaries to exploit the situation.

In nearby Magyarovar, everybody was talking politics as the news came through from Budapest. A peaceful unarmed demonstration was fired on by the local AVH. Between 60 and 90 were shot in the massacre. Upon this, the local police joined the rebels and the Revolutionary Council in Gyor sent an army detachment. The AVH surrendered, and their officers were lynched in revenge by a large crowd. Here as elsewhere essential services were kept ticking over; miners produced just enough coal to keep the power going. Peasants joined the rebellion as the MDP crumbled and the AVH retreated in the face of popular opposition. Farmers worked to feed the rebels. In town after town, radio stations were taken over, Party buildings burnt down, AVOs sought out and killed, informers attacked.

The Borsod district was the largest industrial area in Hungary, and its main town, Miskolc, the largest industrial town outside Budapest. On October 24th a workers' council met at the Dimavag iron foundry. The next day the foundry workers marched into town with a list of demands, removing red stars and the like wherever they were seen. They were joined by other workers and a mass meeting created a workers' council for all the factories of Greater Miskolc. A general strike was declared. On the 26th a crowd besieged the local police trying to get the release of political prisoners. The AVH fired at the crowd. Some police gave their weapons to the workers, and miners turned up with dynamite to get their revenge. Six or seven AVOs were lynched in the ensuing battle. The Workers' Council said "Stalinist provocateurs have felt the just punishment of the people." The next evening the Council calmly announced that it had "taken power in all the Borsod region".

In Salgotarjan in Nograd county all work stopped on 25th October. On the 27th steelworkers marched through the town, taking down red stars, releasing political prisoners and destroying the Soviet war memorial. A 'National Council' was set up for the district. In Pecs, even the AVH at the uranium mines sided with the revolution. The Workers' Council there formed a military council which immediately made plans to face another Soviet attack, which was not long in coming.

The Workers' Councils

The first workers' council to be set up in Budapest was at the United Lamp factory. This council representing ten thousand workers got going on October 24th, within hours of the revolution starting. It appealed to workers to "show that we can manage things better than our former blind and domineering bosses."¹⁵ Within a day, workers' councils were set up in the towns of Miskolc, Gyor, Debrecen and Sztalinvaros: incredibly, the Dimavag Workers' Council mentioned above was actually set up on the 22nd in Budapest, councils appeared at the Beloianis electrical equipment factory, the Gamma optical works, the Canz electric, wagon and machine works, the Lang and Dan-uvia machine-tool factories, the Matyas Rakosi iron and steel works and elsewhere. On the 26th the KDP graciously announced that it "approved" the new workers' councils, but it was hoping to keep them isolated as separate 'factory councils'. However the councils were already assuming a united political and economic role. The general strike was a political act in support of the armed uprising. The councils kept their power at the local level, yet exerted a collective pressure on the government. For the next few days there were constant delegations from the councils to government ministers.

¹⁵ quoted in Critique, p36.

The Miskolc Workers' Council wrote to Nagy: "Bear Eresident, the Workers' Council yesterday assumed power in all the domain of the Borsod department." The councils in the districts unhesitatingly seized power straightaway; in Budapest, only as the armed rebels appeared to win. The councils in Miskolc, Gyor, Bscs and Skolnok had control of radio stations which allowed them to co-ordinate with each other and with Budapest. As the fighting eased off, the workers' councils began to group themselves into district workers' councils. On the 29th delegates from the Ujpest councils met at the United Lamp factory; similar meetings occurred in the 9th district of Budapest and Angyalfold. On the 30th October, nineteen factories in Csepel set up the Central Workers' Council of Csepel. Only one day later, these moves to centralise and strengthen the movement resulted in a Parliament of Workers' Councils for the whole of Budapest.

This historic meeting drew up a statement of the duties and rights of the workers' councils with nine points, here in full:

1. The factory belongs to the workers. The latter should pay to the state a levy calculated on the basis of the output and a portion of the profits.
2. The supreme controlling body of the factory is the Workers' Council democratically elected by the workers.
3. The Workers' Council elects its own executive committee composed of 3–9 members, which acts as the executive body of the Workers' Council, carrying out the decisions and tasks laid down by it.
4. The director is employed "by the factory. The director and the highest employees are to be elected 'by the Workers' Council. This election will take place after a public general meeting called "by the executive committee.
5. The director is responsible to the Workers' Council in every matter which concerns the factory.
6. The Workers' Council itself reserves all rights to:
 - a. approve and ratify all projects concerning the enterprise;
 - b. decide basic wage levels and the methods by which these are to be assessed;
 - c. decide on all matters concerning foreign contracts;
 - d. decide on the conduct of all operations involving credit.
7. In the same way, the Workers' Council resolves any conflicts concerning the hiring and firing of all workers employed in the enterprise.
8. The Workers' Council has the right to examine the balance sheets and to decide on the use to which the profits are to be put.
9. The Workers' Council handles all social questions in the enterprise."¹⁶

This statement was an attempt by a workers' movement within days of an uprising, before the success of the revolution was in any way assured, to take power away from the bureaucrats. It was an attempt to establish workers' control, and to an extent, workers' management, in the

¹⁶ quoted in Lomax, p140.

workplace. It wasn't concerned with abstractions but with a day-to-day reality; it represented a starting-point for the workers' councils. As the workers had generally taken their factories and workplaces over already, the meeting's resolution that the factories etc belonged to the workers recognised a *fait accompli*.

All the councils were both anti-capitalist and anti-Stalinist. Borsod District Workers' Council said that it "resolutely condemns the organisation of political parties."¹⁷ The tendency to unify continued into early November. The workers' councils in Miskolc set up a municipal one for the town, then a departmental one for the whole district. On November 2nd, the president of the Miskolc councils, Jozseff Kiss, called for a 'National Revolutionary Council' based on the workers' councils. The developing implicit trend was towards the idea of "all power to the councils", and its realisation, but this was not clearly stated: the second Russian attack cut short such developments, Imre Nagy and his ministers saw nothing of significance in the councils; similarly, the various political parties that had sprung up looked to their own activity as a solution to Hungary's problems. Workers' self-management was a notion beyond them.

On November 3rd the Csepel and Ujpest district councils called for the strike to end, with a disciplined return to work on the 5th. This was intended to strengthen the Nagy government's negotiating hand with the Russians. On November 1st there had been a declaration of neutrality and withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact — this accession to one of the major demands of the revolution gave Nagy a temporary popularity. However, withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact was unlikely to be tolerated by the Russians. On November 3rd Pravda reported in Moscow that "militant communists had been massacred and murdered"; on the day of the invasion it referred to "bestial atrocities" committed by the rebels, and the Chinese Communist Party paper urged — "Bar the road to reaction in Hungary" (by which they meant — "stop this example to Chinese workers").

The Military Defeat of the Revolution

The Russian attack began on November 4th 150,000 men and over 2,000 tanks were used. The political parties as well as all the various 'leaders' disappeared in the face of it. The working class stood firm and took the lead. An immediate spontaneous general strike started, and the fiercest resistance to the Soviet troops came in working-class areas. Janos Kadar was the new Hungarian puppet the Russians used to 'invite' them in. His 'Revolutionary Worker-Peasant Government' composed of a handful of Communists rested simply on Russian armed might. Soviet troops and tanks made straight for the industrial centres and working-class districts to crush the revolution. Throughout Hungary, peasants and workers tried to explain the truth to the invaders. Pecs radio broadcast messages to Russian troops, many of whom had no idea where they were, that "the Hungarian people have only taken the power into their own hands". As even the Communist Radio Rajk proclaimed "The place of every Hungarian communist today is on the barricades", Kadar's first move was to set up a new secret police force. The workers' councils rejected Kadar and his fake government without hesitation. When Dunapentele was surrounded by Soviet troops on the 7th, the Workers' Council there met the surrender ultimatum with the statement: "Dunapentele is the foremost socialist town in Hungary. Its inhabitants are workers, and power is in their

¹⁷ Molnar, p179.

hands. The houses have all been built by the workers themselves. The workers will defend the town from 'fascist excesses' but also from Soviet troops!"

In Budapest the heaviest concentration of Soviet armour was in Csepel and Kobanya. In the centre of the city fighting went on till the 6th, when the rebels' ammunition ran out. Some suburbs held out until the 8th; Ujpest and Kobanya till the 9th and 10th, leaving Red Csepel to fall on the 11th when the Russians could move all their troops to attack it. These last districts saw by far the fiercest fighting. Some 80–90% of the Hungarian wounded were young workers. Kadar's own reports confirmed that most damage occurred in the working-class areas. On the 7th, rebels raised the red flag to commemorate the Russian Revolution, while the heirs of that revolution killed Hungarian workers. The AVOs re-emerged, looking for revenge for their recent humiliations. Government proclamations started to appear on walls. Passers-by defaced them, or pasted over them, or just ripped them down. In Csepel the workers joked grimly "The 40,000 aristocrats and fascists of Csepel are on strike." Trenches were dug in front of the workers' flats. Csepel workers for those seven days slept eight hours, fought for eight hours and spent the other eight hours working in the factories producing arms and ammunition. The Csepel armoured car made its appearance — a three-wheel mechanised wheelbarrow with a machine-gun in the bucket propped up with sandbags. Against this, the Red Army used heavy artillery and bombers. *Le Figaro*, a French paper, commented, "The Red Army now occupies Budapest. It is red with the blood of the workers."

Outside the capital, Dunapentele lasted till the 9th led by its Workers' Council. In Pecs, the Workers' Council decided not to defend the town. Instead a plan was carried out for guerrilla warfare in the nearby hills: this went on in a major way for ten days, and some miners and soldiers carried on fighting the Russians for several weeks, in Miskolc there was a brief resistance to the Soviet attack, followed by a declaration of a general strike of all non-essential workers. The Borsod Workers' Council offered to take 20,000 armed workers to Budapest so that Nagy (now sheltering in the Yugoslav embassy) could prove to the Russians that their fears of a 'capitalist restoration' were groundless. Later on, when the Budapest police chief, Kopacsi, who came from the Miskolc area, was tried and sentenced to death, the Borsod Workers' Council repeated this offer to Kadar, who promptly reprieved Kopacsi. In Salgotarjan in Nograd county, workers supported their local 'Rational Workers' Council' after the Soviet invasion. Until the 16th the workers held the town hall, the local press and radio, and local army units were on the revolution's side. On that day the Russian troops took over, setting up a 'Revolutionary Worker-Peasant Committee' in opposition to the Workers' Council. On December 1st, the Russians arrested the leaders of the National Workers' Council, but real power still lay in the hands of the workers: they marched to the police HQ and secured the release of their fellow-workers. There followed a solid two-day strike in the area. A few days later when further arrests of district Workers' Council members took place, thousands of demonstrators were confronted by tanks, and the AVH fired on unarmed crowds.

Workers' Councils lead the Resistance

The military defeat of the Hungarian workers and peasants thus took just over a week. The struggle now moved into a new phase. The workers may have been beaten by an overwhelming armed force from outside, but they still had control over productions as long as they could keep

that, “workers’ power” was a reality and Kadar’s government would rest on repression alone. The workers’ councils reorganised in the wake of the invasion, setting up district workers’ councils with an overtly political role. The Csepel Workers* Council sent delegations to Kadar and the Soviet army commander. The common demand of the councils was that the workers were to run the factories, ensuring that power stayed with them. On November 12th moves were made towards establishing a Central Workers’ Council for the whole of Greater Budapest, and on the 14th the founding meeting was held at the United Lamp factory. A young Hungarian intellectual, Miklos Erasso, has claimed the credit for the idea of a Central Workers’ Council (CWC), but he himself relates how he was put in his place at the meeting: “The elderly social democratic chairman asked: ‘What factory are you from?’ ‘None’, I said. ‘What right have you to be here?’ I said that I had actually organised the meeting. The chairman replied: ‘This is untrue. This meeting is an historical inevitability!’”¹⁸ The CWC was indeed the inevitable result of the councils’ attempts to unite. Krasso’s ‘idea’ coincided with the direction of the workers’ movement.

The delegates who came together were in the main toolmakers, turners, steelworkers and engineers. The following day a more widely based meeting was held. Some of the delegates wanted to create a National Workers’ Council for the whole of Hungary then and there; while many agreed, it was pointed out that they only had a mandate to form a CWC for Greater Budapest. The workers’ councils were determined to be truly democratic. “For the Hungarian workers and their delegates the most important thing about the councils was precisely their democratic nature. There was a very close relationship between the delegates and the entire working-class: the delegates were elected for the sole purpose of carrying out the workers’ wishes, and it is noteworthy that workers often recalled delegates who diverged from their mandate. They didn’t like delegates who were too ‘independent’.”¹⁹ At the meeting, Sandor Racz, elected president, stated “We have no need of the government! We are and shall remain the leaders here in Hungary!” Unfortunately, the majority were inclined to compromise in the face of armed might, and to negotiate with Kadar’s fake government. A return to work, backed also by the Csepel Workers’ Council, was planned in order to show that the strike was conscious and organised. Many workers were very angry at this, and accusations of sell-outs abounded.

As real power lay with the councils, Kadar’s government had to destroy them and reinstall authoritarian relationships in the factories. For two months the struggle continued, Points 9 and 11 of Kadar’s ‘Workers and Peasants Revolutionary Programme’ were for “workers’ management of the factories” and “democratic election of the workers’ councils”. Kadar’s counter-revolution had to hide behind fine phrases. But there was no way Kadar could agree to the workers’ demands: “collective ownership of the factories, which were to be in the hands of the workers’ councils, which were to act as the only directors of the enterprises; a widening of the councils’ powers in the economic, social and cultural fields; the organisation of a militia-type police force, subject to the councils; and on the political plane, a multi-socialist-party system.”²⁰ The CWC negotiated directly with the Soviet army commander, Grebennik, giving him a list of missing workers’ council members every day, whereupon the Russians released them from prison. The Soviets for their part showed that they knew power lay with the councils, not Kadar. At first, Grebennik treated workers’ council delegations as fascists and imperialist agents; in due course though a Soviet

¹⁸ Eyewitness, pl63.

¹⁹ Eyewitness, p176.

²⁰ Eyewitness, p169-70.

colonel and interpreter were made permanent representatives to the CWC. It was the councils, not Kadar's government, that was arranging all food and medical supplies.

On November 18th, a plan was developed for a truly national council, a 'parliament of Workers* Councils'. This was to have 156 members, delegates from district workers' councils in Budapest and the counties, and from the largest factories. This body would elect a thirty-strong presidium, which would co-opt up to 20 representatives from other groups such as the army, intellectuals, political parties, the police. An appeal went out for delegates to attend a conference on the 21st to discuss this. "The principal task of this national conference was to create a power under the direction of the workers, and in opposition to the government." On the 19th work restarted as a sign of discipline and support by the workers for the CWC. Delegates to the conference came from Budapest, Győr, Pécs, Tatabánya, Ózd and there were others from peasant organisations. A vital link had been established between the CWC and the provincial councils. The various miners' delegates were very much against the return to work: "You can work if you want, but we shall provide neither coal nor electricity, we shall flood all the mines!" But those in favour pointed out that the strike was hitting everybody indiscriminately, and a return to work would keep the workers united in their workplaces.

A rumour spread through Budapest that the CWC had been arrested: the workers immediately resumed their strike. Although the workers in Csepel joined in, the Csepel Workers' Council condemned the new strike. Before a commission from the CWC could investigate this difference, the Csepel workers had promptly elected a brand new council that was in line with their wishes and actions, supporting the strike and the CWC. Workers were arguing through the different options facing them now: active resistance, passive resistance or flight. The first could not be maintained, although in fact there was never a Hungarian surrender, and a quarter of a million Hungarians chose the latter and fled the country to the west. Thousands were deported to Russia, particularly younger workers, in an act of indiscriminate terror. Railway workers did what they could to prevent these, for instance by removing railway track. Some ambushes were carried out against trains and deportees released. Most deportees were allowed back during 1957.

As passive resistance became the course followed by most Hungarians, a sullen hatred developed towards the Russians and their puppet government. When, later on, the Russian leader Khrushchev came to Hungary, supposed mass meetings of support on the radio had to be boosted by canned applause. A succession of sarcastic posters appeared on walls: "Take care! Ten million counter-revolutionaries are roaming the country. Hundreds of thousands of landowners, capitalists, generals and bishops are at large, from the aristocratic quarters to the factory areas of Csepel and Kápolna. Because of this gang's murderous activities only six workers are left in the entire country. These latter have set up a government in Skolnok." "Lost: the confidence of the people. Honest finder is asked to return it to Janos Kadar, prime minister of Hungary, address: 10,000 Soviet Tanks Street." "Wanted! Premier for Hungary. Qualifications — no sincere convictions; no backbone; ability to read and write not essential, but must be able to sign documents drawn up by others." "Proletarians of the World Unite: but not in groups of three or more." A popular joke did the rounds: "D'you know where we went wrong in October? We interfered in our own internal affairs."

As part of the policy of passive resistance, a silent demonstration took place on November 23rd: from 2 o'clock till 11 in the afternoon, no one went out on the streets of Budapest. This sort of action showed what Hungarians thought of Kadar, and was impossible for his new security force to suppress. He appealed to the workers' councils to help establish order and get production

restarted. As if in reply, the CV/C1 stated on November 27th “We reaffirm that we have received our mission from the working class... and we shall work with all our might for the strengthening of the workers’ power.” The only press that the councils had was a duplicated ‘Information Bulletin’ which was passed from hand to hand or read out loud at meetings. The councils allowed no party organisations in the factories: MSzMP and pro-government trade union officials were banned and physically prevented from entering.

December saw Kadar’s government slowly wrest power away from the workers’ councils in the battle for the factories. From below came a relentless pressure for anti-Kadar action. On December 4th there was the ‘March of Mothers’, a silent procession of 30,000 women in black with national and black flags. In support, all houses had lighted candles in their windows at midnight, despite the government taking all the candles it could out of the shops. The next day a decree dissolved the Revolutionary Committees that had sprung up alongside the workers’ councils in the districts, for instance in Győr, and 200 workers’ council members were arrested. The offensive continued on the 6th with the arrest of the Workers’ Councils in the Ganz and MAVAG factories. At the same time the CWC was discussing plans for a National Workers’ Council and a provisional workers’ parliament with representatives from all the workers’ councils. On the 8th, 80 miners were killed in Salgotarjan by Soviet troops. The next day Kadar dissolved the CWC, arresting most of its members. The others carried on and declared a 48-hour strike in response to the dissolution and the shooting of the miners. One delegate declared “Let the lights go out, let there be no gas, let there be nothing!”

So it was for a 100% solid two-day strike. Two of the CWC leaders who escaped arrest, Sandor Racz and Sander Bali, were protected for two days by workers at the Beloiannis factory, who refused to hand them over despite the fact that Soviet tanks were ringing the factory. On the 11th, Kadar ‘invited’ them to negotiations: as soon as they left the factory they were arrested. The strike continued. Even the Party paper ‘Nepszabadsag’ was forced to say of it that “the like of which has never before been seen in the history of the Hungarian workers’ movement.” On the 13th as the strike finished, the Csepel iron and steel workers sat in demanding the release of Racz and Bali; other factories followed suit. Soviet troops were then moved into the major factories to force the workers to work at gunpoint.

The Revolution Defeated

The strike was the workers’ last card. Kadar’s “Revolutionary Workers’ and Peasants’ Government” had defeated the workers and peasants. Internment was introduced, and the death penalty set for striking or inciting to strike. A few days after this announcement, the Csepel Iron and Steel Workers’ Council resigned with the words “we are returning our mandate into the hands of the workers”. As other councils did the same, Kadar complained of “provocative self-dissolutions”! The CWC’s final message was that “sabotage and passive resistance are the order of the day”. Kadar, backed by ‘a new AVE and the Soviet army, had seized the means of production back from the workers and attacked every workers’ organisation. Naturally, he had a theoretical justification for this. In Kay 1957 » he told the National Assembly: “In the recent past, we have encountered the phenomenon that certain categories of workers acted against their own interests and, in this case, the duty of the leaders is to represent the interests of the masses and not to

implement mechanically their incorrect ideas. If the wish of the masses does not coincide with progress, then one must lead the masses in another direction.”

Two thousand Hungarians were executed for what the ruling classes everywhere will always call ‘incorrect ideas’. Continuing resistance to Kadar’s government can be gauged from the scale of the repression: the curfew was not lifted until May 1957; summary justice was not brought to an end till November 1957; during 1957 and 1958, executions occurred virtually every day; two years after the revolution, there were some 40,000 political prisoners; in 1959, nine members of the Ujpest Workers’ Council were executed. It was not till January 1960 that death sentences were officially ended for ‘offences’ during the revolution (although one insurgent, Laszlo Hickelburg, was executed in 1961). The last internment camps were closed in June 1960, but several hundred rebels were not released from prison till the late ‘sixties and early ‘seventies.

The workers of Hungary proved once again that freedom comes from below, not from any leadership (‘revolutionary’ or otherwise) above acting on their behalf. To destroy the communist bureaucracy they adopted forms of organisation that were democratic, anti-bureaucratic and included the whole working-class these councils were also constructive. The workers were able to destroy the old and start building the new within days if not hours. They rejected the official concepts of socialism and created their own, workers’ self-management and direct democracy, a logical development from previous workers’ struggles for a new society.

The Workers’ Councils were never in any way separate from the working-class. They never betrayed it, and dissolved themselves rather than be recuperated by the authorities! they returned to the class from whence they came. The Hungarian working-class and their councils reorganised society, ran production, kept their order and united the rest of the population behind them. They were only defeated by a massive military force and the passivity of the international working-class. Given the chance to develop freely along the lines they started out on, the potential of the councils was the creation of a free human society at last. The programme of the Hungarian Revolution still remains for the working-class to carry out.

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