

# Social Democracy and Communism

*Pannekoek, Anton*  
1927

First published as a pamphlet under the pseudonym K. Horner in Hamburg, 1919. Later published in the KAPD journal, *Kommunistische Arbeiterzeitung*, in 1927. This translation is based on the latter version. From <https://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1927/sdc.htm>.

## 1. The Road Followed by the Workers' Movement

The world war brought not just a violent revolution in all economic and political relations; it also completely transformed socialism. Those who grew up with German social democracy and participated in its ranks in the workers' class struggle, will be confused by all its new features, and will ask themselves if everything they had learned and accomplished until now was false, and if they must therefore learn and follow the new theories. The answer is: it was not false, but incomplete. Socialism is not an immutable theory. As the world changes, men's theoretical understanding grows, and along with new relations, new methods to achieve our goal also emerge. This can be seen by casting our glance back upon the development of socialism over the last century.

At the beginning of the 19th century, utopian socialism reigned. Broad-minded thinkers deeply sensitive to the unbearable nature of capitalism sketched the outlines of a better society, in which labor would be organized cooperatively. A new perspective emerged when Marx and Engels published the *Communist Manifesto* in 1847. Here, for the first time, the principal points of the socialism of the future clearly stood out: it was from capitalism itself that the force capable of transforming society would emerge, and this force would give birth to a socialist society. This force is the class struggle of the proletariat. The poor, scorned, ignorant workers will be in the forefront of those who will carry out this transformation, as they take up the struggle against the bourgeoisie, gaining in the process power and ability and organizing themselves as a class; by way of a revolution, the proletariat will conquer political power and carry out a comprehensive economic transformation.

It must also be emphasized that Marx and Engels never called this whole undertaking "socialism", nor did they call themselves "socialists". Engels expressed the reason for this quite clearly: in that era, various bourgeois currents were characterized under the name of socialism, currents which, due to a feeling of identification with the proletariat or other motives, wanted to overthrow the capitalist order; quite frequently, their goals were even reactionary. Communism, on the other hand, was a proletarian movement. The workers' groups which attacked the capitalist system called themselves communists. It was from the Communist League that the *Manifesto* emerged, which pointed out to the proletariat the goal and the direction of its struggle.

In 1848 the bourgeois revolutions broke out, clearing the way for the development of capitalism in central Europe, and facilitating the transformation of the small traditional

statelets into more powerful Nation–States. Industry expanded at a record pace during the 1850s and 1860s, and amidst the ensuing prosperity all the revolutionary movements collapsed so completely that even the word communism was forgotten. Later, during the 1860s, when the workers' movement reemerged in England, France and Germany within a more fully–developed capitalism, it had a much broader base than the previous communist sects, but its goals were much more limited and short–term in nature: improvement of the immediate situation of the workers, legal recognition of trade unions, democratic reforms. In Germany, Lassalle led agitation in favor of State–supported producers' cooperatives; in his view, the State should act as the architect of social policy in favor of the working class, and in order to compel the State to assume this role, the working class would have to avail itself of democracy – the power of the masses over the State. It is therefore understandable that the Party founded by Lassalle laid claim to the significant name of social democracy: this name expressed the Party's goal, that is, democracy with a social purpose.

Little by little, however, the Party outgrew its initial narrow objectives. Germany's unrestrained capitalist development, the war for the formation of the German Empire, the pact between the bourgeoisie and the militarist landowners, the anti–socialist law, the reactionary customs and taxation policies – all of these things drove the working class forward, making it the vanguard of the rest of European workers movement, which adopted its name and its policies. Practice honed its spirit for understanding Marx's doctrine, which was made accessible to socialists by the numerous popularized versions written by Kautsky and their political applications. In this manner they came to once again recognize the principles and goals of the old communism: the *Communist Manifesto* was their programmatic work, Marxism was their theory, the class struggle their tactic, the conquest of political power by the proletariat – the social revolution – their goal.

There was, however, one difference: the character of the new Marxism, the spirit of the whole movement, was unlike that of the old communism. The social democracy was growing within an environment characterized by a powerful burst of capitalist expansion. It was not, at first, compelled to consider a violent transformation. For this reason, the revolution was postponed into the distant future and the social democracy was satisfied with the tasks of propaganda and organization in preparation for the postponed revolution, and contented itself for the time being with struggles for immediate improvements. Its theory asserted that the revolution had to come as the necessary result of economic development, forgetting that action, the spontaneous activity of the masses, was necessary to bring this about. It thus became a kind of economic fatalism. The social democracy and the rapidly growing trade unions which it dominated became members of the capitalist society; they became the growing opposition and resistance of the working masses, as the institutions which prevented the total impoverishment of the masses under the pressure of capital. Thanks to the general franchise, they even became a strong opposition within the bourgeois parliament. Their basic character was, despite their theory, reformist, and in relation to day–to–day issues, palliative and minimalist instead of revolutionary. The principal cause of this development lay in proletarian prosperity, which granted the proletarian masses a certain degree of essential security, dampening the expression of revolutionary views.

During the last decade these tendencies have been reinforced. The workers' movement achieved what was possible in such circumstances: a powerful Party, with a million members and garnering one–third of the vote, and alongside it a trade union movement concentrating in its ranks the majority of organized labor. It then clashed with an even more powerful barrier, against which the old methods were not so effective: the potent organization of big capital into syndicates, cartels and trusts, as well as the policies of finance capital, heavy industry and militarism, all of which were forms of imperialism that

were controlled by forces outside parliament. But this workers' movement was not capable of a total tactical reorientation and renewal, as long as its own powerful organizations were arrayed against it, organizations which were considered to be ends in themselves and were eager for recognition. The voice of this tendency was the bureaucracy, the numerous army of officials, leaders, parliamentarians, secretaries and editors, who comprised a group of their own with their own interests. Their aim was to gradually change the nature of the Party's activities while keeping the old name. The conquest of political power by the proletariat became, for them, the conquest of a parliamentary majority by their Party, that is, the replacement of the ruling politicians and State bureaucracy by themselves, the social democratic politicians and the trade union and Party bureaucracies. The advent of socialism was now supposed to arrive by way of new legislation in favor of the proletariat. And it was not just among the revisionists that this position found favor. Kautsky, too, the political theoretician of the radicals, said during a debate that the social democracy wanted to staff the State, with all of its departments and ministries, merely in order to put other people, from the social democracy, in the place of the ministers currently occupying those posts.

The World War also led to the outbreak of a crisis in the workers' movement. The social democracy, generally, put itself at the service of imperialism under the formula of "defense of the fatherland"; the trade union and Party bureaucracies worked hand in hand with the State bureaucracy and business to make the proletariat expend its strength, its blood and its life to the utmost extremes. This signified the collapse of the social democracy as a Party of proletarian revolution. Now, despite the fierce repression, a growing opposition has emerged in all countries, and the old banner of the class struggle, of Marxism and of the revolution is raised again. But under what name should this banner be raised? It would be completely justified to reclaim the old formulas of social democracy, which the social democratic parties have left in the lurch. But the very name "socialist" has now lost all of its meaning and power, since the differences between the socialists and the bourgeoisie have almost entirely disappeared. In order for the class struggle to move forward, the first and most important matter to attend to is to fight against the social democracy, which has led the proletariat into the abyss of poverty, submission, war, annihilation and powerlessness. Should the new fighters accept such infamous and shameful names? A new name was necessary, but what name was more appropriate than any other to declare its role as the principle bearer of the old original class struggle? In every country the same thought arose: reclaim the name of communism.

Once again, as in the time of Marx, communism as a revolutionary and proletarian movement confronts socialism as a reformist and bourgeois movement. And the new communism is not just a new edition of the theory of radical social democracy. As a result of the world crisis, it has gained new depth, which totally differentiates it from the old theory. In what follows, we shall elucidate the differences between the two theories.

## **2. Class Struggle and Socialization**

During its best days, social democracy established as its principle the class struggle against the bourgeoisie, and as its goal, the realization of socialism as soon as it could conquer political power. Now that social democracy has abandoned that principle and that goal, both of them have been taken up again by communism.

When the war broke out, social democracy abandoned the fight against the bourgeoisie. Kautsky asserted that the class struggle was only applicable to peacetime, while during wartime class solidarity against the enemy nation must take its place. In support of this assertion he pulled from out of his sleeve the lie of the "defensive war", with which the masses were deceived at the start of hostilities. The leaders of the SPD majority and

the Independents differed on this point only because the former collaborated enthusiastically with the war policy of the bourgeoisie while the latter patiently endured it, because they did not dare to lead the struggle themselves. After the defeat of German militarism in November 1918, the same pattern was repeated. The social democratic leaders joined the government alongside the bourgeois parties and tried to persuade the workers that this constituted the political power of the proletariat. But they did not use their power over the Councils and government ministries to realize socialism, but to reestablish capitalism. Besides this, one must add that the colossal power of Capital, which is the principle enemy and exploiter of the proletariat, is now embodied in Entente Capital, which now rules the world. The German bourgeoisie, reduced to impotence, can only exist as a peon and agent of Entente imperialism and is responsible for crushing the German workers and exploiting them on behalf of Entente Capital. The social democrats, as the political representatives of this bourgeoisie, and who now form the German government, have the task of carrying out the orders of the Entente and requesting its aid and support.

For their part, the Independents, who during the war restrained the workers in their struggle against the powerful German imperialism, have seen that after the war their task consists – with, for example, their praise for the League of Nations and Wilson and their propaganda in favor of the Versailles Peace Treaty – in restraining the workers in their struggle against the arrogance of world capitalism.

In the previous period, when social democracy denounced and opposed war, the good faith of its leaders could have been taken for granted, and one could have also thought that their elevation to the highest posts in the government would have signified the political power of the proletariat, since, as representatives of the workers, they had framed legislation for the realization of, or at least the first steps towards socialism. But every worker knows that – despite the occasional proclamation – they now have nothing at all to do with such things. Is it agreed that these gentlemen, once they have satisfied the aims of their greed, have no other desires or goals; that the social democracy was therefore nothing to them but a lot of hot air? Perhaps to some degree. But there are also other more important reasons which explain their behavior.

The social democracy has said that, in the current circumstances, after the terrible economic collapse, it is no longer by any means possible to realize socialism. And here we find an important distinction between the positions of communism and social democracy. The social democrats say that socialism is only possible in a society of abundance, of increasing prosperity. The communists say that in such periods capitalism is most secure, because then the masses do not think about revolution. The social democrats say: first, production must be reestablished, to avoid a total catastrophe and to keep the masses from dying of hunger. The communists say: now, when the economy has hit rock bottom, is the perfect time to reestablish it upon socialist foundations. The social democrats say that even the most basic recovery of production requires the continuation of the old capitalist mode of production, in conformance with which all institutions are structured and thanks to which a devastating class struggle against the bourgeoisie will be avoided. The communists say: a recovery of the capitalist economic foundations is completely impossible; the world is sinking ever deeper into bankruptcy before our eyes, into a degree of poverty which makes a break with the bourgeoisie necessary, as the bourgeoisie is blocking the only possible road to reconstruction. So the social democrats want to first reestablish capitalism, avoiding the class struggle; the communists want to build socialism from scratch right now, with the class struggle as their guide.

What, then, is this all about? The social labor process is the production of all the goods needed for life. But the satisfaction of human needs is not the goal of capitalist production; its goal is surplus value, profit. All capitalist activities are directed towards

profit, and only for that purpose are the workers allowed to work in their factories to manufacture goods in their countries, goods which are required to satisfy our needs. Now, this whole labor process is paralyzed and destroyed. Profits, of course, are still being made, even enormous profits, but this is taking place via the tortuous detours of capital flight, parasitism, plunder, the black market and speculation. If the regular source of profit is to be reestablished for the bourgeoisie, then production, the labor process, must be restarted. Is this possible?

Insofar as it is a question of labor, of production, this cannot be so difficult. The working class masses are there, ready to work. As for food, enough is produced in Germany. As for raw materials, such as coal and iron, these are in relatively short supply in comparison to the great mass of highly-skilled industrial workers; but this could easily be compensated for, thanks to trade with the less industrialized, but raw materials-rich countries of Eastern Europe. Thus, the recovery of production does not pose a superhuman problem. But capitalist production means that part of the product goes to the capitalist without the capitalist having to work for it.

The bourgeois legal order is the means which makes it possible for these capitalists to reap this profit as if it were a natural process, thanks to its property rights. By means of these rights, capital has "claims" to its profit. The same thing happened before the war. But the war has enormously increased the profit claims of capital. The State debt today is numbered almost in the billions, whereas before the war it was just in the millions. This means that the owners of those titles to public State debt expect to receive, without working, all their billions in interest payments from the labor of the whole population, in the form of taxes. Furthermore, in Germany's case one must add to this sum the war indemnities owed to the Entente, which add up to a total sum of 200 or 300 billion, more than half the gross national product. This means that, out of the total sum of production, more than half must be paid to the capitalists of the Entente on account of war indemnities. Besides this, there is the German bourgeoisie itself, which wants to extract the greatest possible profit in order to accumulate new capital. So, what will be left for the workers? The worker, in spite of all of this, needs to live; but it is clear that under these circumstances his upkeep will be reduced to a minimum, while all of capital's profits can only be produced thanks to more intensive labor, a longer working day and more refined methods of exploitation.

Capitalist production now implies such a high degree of exploitation that it will make life intolerable and almost impossible for the workers. The reestablishment of production is not in itself so very difficult; it requires capable and determined organization, as well as the enthusiastic collaboration of the entire proletariat. But the reestablishment of production under such tremendous pressure and under conditions of such systematic exploitation, which only gives the workers the minimum needed to sustain life, is practically impossible. The first attempt to implement such a policy must fail due to the resistance and the refusal of the workers themselves, on the part of those whom it would dispossess of any prospects of meeting their essential life-needs, leading to the gradual destruction of the whole economy. Germany provides an example of such a scenario.

Already during the war the communists recognized the impossibility of paying the enormous war debt and its interest, and put forth the demand that the war debts and indemnities should be cancelled. But that is not all. Should the private debts incurred during the war also be cancelled? There is little difference between capital which has been borrowed during the war to build artillery pieces and the stock issues of a factory making armor or artillery shells. In this case one cannot distinguish between the various kinds of capital, nor can one admit the claims of one kind to its profit while rejecting the others. All profits constitute for capital a claim on production, which hinders

reconstruction. For an economy in such a precarious situation, the tremendous burden of the costs of the war is not the only weight it must bear; all its other claimants must also be entered on the scales. This is why communism, which as a matter of principle rejects all capital's claims to profit, is the only practically feasible principle. The economy must be practically rebuilt from scratch, without any regard for capital's profit.

The rejection of capital's right to profit was always, however, an axiom of social democracy as well. How does social democracy approach this problem now? It is fighting for "socialization", that is, for the expropriation of industry by the State, and the indemnification of the industrialists. This means that, once more – and this time even through the mediation of the State – part of the product of labor must be paid to these capitalists for not working. In this way, the exploitation of the workers by capital remains the same as before. Two things were always essential characteristics of socialism: the elimination of exploitation and the social regulation of production. The first is the most important goal for the proletariat; the second is the most rational method for increasing production, by way of its technical organization. But in the "socialization" plans being prepared by social democracy exploitation continues to exist, and the de-privatization of industry only leads to State capitalism (or State socialism), which turns the capitalist owners into shareholders of the State. The "socialization" currently sought by the social democrats is therefore a lie for the proletariat, to whom only the external facade of socialism is displayed, while in fact exploitation is kept alive. The foundation of this position is undoubtedly the fear of a harsh conflict with the bourgeoisie, at a time when the proletariat is growing more confident, but is still not in possession of all the forces required for the revolutionary struggle. In practice, however, what this really amounts to is an attempt to put capitalism back on its feet, upon new foundations. Naturally, this attempt must fail, since the impoverished economy cannot afford such gifts to capital.

The social democrats of both tendencies, then, maintain the exploitation of the workers by capital; one policy leaves capitalism to its own development, the other stimulates and regulates this exploitation through the intermediary of the State. Both, for the worker, have just this one solution: Work, work, work hard, with all your strength! Because the reconstruction of the capitalist economy is only possible if the proletariat exerts itself to satisfy the demands of the most extreme degree of exploitation.

### **3. Mass Action and Revolution**

Even before the war the difference between social democracy and communism was already evident, although not under that name. This difference involved the tactics of the struggle. Under the name of "left radicals", an opposition arose at that time within social democracy (from which the predecessors of today's communists emerged), which defended mass action against the "radicals" and the revisionists. In this dispute it became clear that the radical spokesmen, especially Kautsky, defended a position opposed to revolutionary action, both theoretically as well as tactically.

The parliamentary and trade union struggle had brought the workers – in a vigorously expanding capitalism – some economic improvements, while simultaneously building a powerful barrier against capitalism's permanent tendencies towards pauperization of the working class. Over the last decade, however, this barrier slowly gave way, in spite of the workers' strong and expanding organization: imperialism reinforced the power of the capitalists and militarism, weakened parliament, put the trade unions on the defensive and began to prepare for the world war. It was clear that the old methods of struggle no longer worked. The masses were instinctively aware of this; in every country they participated in actions which were often opposed by their leaders, launched large-scale trade union struggles, carried out transport strikes which paralyzed the economy, or took part in

political demonstrations. The outbreak of proletarian revolt frequently erupted in such a way as to shatter the self-confidence of the bourgeoisie, which was compelled to make concessions; or the movements were often enough quenched by means of massacres.

The social democratic leaders also tried to use these actions for their own political objectives; they acknowledged the usefulness of political strikes for particular goals, but only on condition that they be reduced to pre-arranged limits, on condition that they begin and end when the leaders give the order, and that they always remain subordinated to the tactics determined by the leaders. Thus, it often happens that such strikes take place today, too, but usually without too much success. The tempestuous violence of the elemental uprising of the masses is paralyzed by a policy of compromise.

The element of class action that immediately creates panic in the ruling bourgeoisie – the fear that the workers' movement might take on a revolutionary character – disappeared from these "disciplined" mass actions, since every precaution had been taken to ensure their harmlessness.

The revolutionary Marxists – today's communists – then made an assessment of the limited character of the ideology of the social democratic leadership. They saw that, throughout history, the masses, the classes themselves, had been the motor force of and the impulse behind every action. Revolutions never arose from the prudent decisions of recognized leaders. When the circumstances and the situation became intolerable, the masses suddenly rose, overthrew the old authorities, and the new class or a fraction of that class took power and molded the State or society in accordance with its needs. It was only during the last 50 years of peaceful capitalist development that the illusion emerged and flourished that leaders, as individual subjects, direct the course of history in accordance with their enlightened intelligence. Parliamentarians and the staff attached to the State executive offices believe that their deeds, actions and decisions determine the course of events; the masses who follow them must only take action when they are called upon to do so, ratifying the words of their spokesmen and then quickly disappearing from the political stage. The masses have to play a simple passive role, that of choosing their leaders, and it is the latter that provide the decisive impulse to the course of development.

But if this belief is inadequate for the understanding of the past revolutions of history, it is yet more inadequate for understanding the present situation, in the light of the profound difference between the bourgeois revolution and the proletarian revolution. In the bourgeois revolution, the popular masses of workers and petit bourgeoisie only rise once (as in Paris in February of 1848), or intermittently, as in the great French Revolution, in order to overthrow the old royalty or a new power which has gotten out of control such as that of the Girondins. Once their work was done they gave way to new men, the representatives of the bourgeoisie, who formed a new government, and proceeded to reconfigure and reconstruct the State institutions, the constitution and the laws. The power of the proletarian masses was needed to destroy the old regime, but not to construct the new one, because the new regime was the organization of a new class power.

It was in accordance with this model that the radical social democrats conceived the proletarian revolution, which – unlike the reformists – they believed to be necessary. A great popular uprising must put an end to the old military-absolutist rule and bring the social democrats to power, who would take care of everything else, building socialism by means of new legislation. This is how they conceive of the proletarian revolution. But the proletarian revolution is something completely different. The proletarian revolution is the liberation of the masses from all class power and all exploitation. This means that they must themselves take history into their own hands, in order to make themselves masters of their own labor. Starting with the old human species, limited to slave labor, which only thinks of itself and sees no further than the walls of its factory, they must create new men,

proud, ready to fight, with an independent spirit, suffused with solidarity, not allowing themselves to be deceived by the clever lies of bourgeois theories, regulating the labor process on their own. This change cannot take place as a result of a single revolutionary act, but will require a long process, in which the workers, through necessity and bitter disillusionments, occasional victories and repeated defeats, slowly build up the necessary force to attain the cohesive unity and the maturity for freedom and power. This process of struggle is the proletarian revolution.

How long this process will take will vary from country to country and according to the particular circumstances, and will depend above all on the power of resistance of each ruling class. The fact that it took a relatively short period of time in Russia was due to the fact that the bourgeoisie there was weak and that, thanks to the latter's alliance with the landed nobility, the peasants were impelled to take the side of the workers. The bourgeoisie's axis of power is the violence of the State, the violent organization of force with all the means at its disposal: law, school, police, judiciary, army and bureaucracy, which hold in their hands the control over all sectors of public life. The revolution is the struggle of the proletariat against this power apparatus of the ruling class; the proletariat can only win its freedom if it opposes the organization of the enemy with a stronger and more cohesive organization of its own. The bourgeoisie and State power try to keep the workers impotent, dispersed and intimidated, in order to interrupt the growth of their unity through violence and lies, and to demoralize them concerning the power of their own actions. Against these efforts, mass action arises from the ranks of the workers' multitudes, action leading to the paralysis and breakdown of State organizations. As long as the latter remain intact, the proletariat is not victorious, because those organizations will constantly operate against the proletariat. Therefore, its struggle – if the world does not want to come to an end in capitalism – must finally do away with the State machinery, which must be destroyed and rendered harmless by the powerful actions of the proletariat.

Kautsky had already opposed this conception before the war. According to him, the proletariat must not adopt this tactic, which would lead it to destroy the State in an outburst of violence, since it would need the State apparatus for its own purposes. All the ministries of the existing State, once in the power of the proletariat, will continue to be necessary in order to implement the laws passed on behalf of the workers. The goal of the proletariat must not be the destruction of the State, but its conquest. The question of how to create the organization of the power of the victorious proletariat – whether it will be a continuation of the bourgeois State, as Kautsky believed, or a completely new organization – is thus posed. But the social democratic theories, as they have been formulated and propagandized by Kautsky over the last thirty years, only spoke of economics and capitalism, from which socialism would have to “necessarily” emerge; “how” all of this is to happen was never elaborated and thus the question of the relation between the State and revolution was not addressed at the time. It was to find its answer only later. In any event, the opposition between the social democratic and communist theories was already clear in regard to the question of revolution.

For the social democrats, the proletarian revolution is a single act, a popular movement that destroys the old power and puts the social democrats in the driver's seat of the State, in the government posts. The downfall of the Hohenzollerns in Germany on November 7, 1918 is in their eyes a pure proletarian revolution, which only achieved victory thanks to the special circumstance that the old compulsion was done away with as a result of the war. For the communists, this revolt could only signify the beginning of a proletarian revolution which, by overthrowing the old compulsion, cleared the way for the workers to finish off the old order and construct their class organization. As it turned out, the workers allowed themselves to be led by social democracy and helped rebuild the

State's power after it had been paralyzed: they are still in the midst of an epoch of difficult struggles.

For Kautsky and his friends, Germany is an authentic social democratic republic where the workers, while not in power, at least collaborate in the government – Noske and his apparatus of repression are only esthetic blemishes. They must not, of course, think that they have arrived at socialism just yet. Kautsky has constantly repeated that, according to the Marxist conception, the social revolution will not take place all at once, but is a long historical process: capitalism is not yet mature enough for the economic revolution. By this he means to say, among other things, that, although the proletarian revolution has taken place, the proletarians must allow themselves to be exploited as before and a few big industries must only slowly be nationalized. Or, to put it in plain English: instead of the old ministers, the social democrats have occupied the highest positions in the State; but capitalism is still the same along with its exploitation.

This is the practical meaning of the social democratic claim, according to which, after a proletarian revolutionary uprising, struck at one blow, a much longer process of socialization and of social revolution must be undertaken. Against this conception, communism asserts that the proletarian revolution, the seizure of power by the proletariat, is a very slow process of mass struggle, through which the proletariat will rise to power and isolate the State machinery. At the apex of this struggle, when the workers take power, exploitation will be quickly ended, the suppression of all claims to profit without labor will be proclaimed, and the first steps towards the new juridical basis for the reconstruction of the economy as a consciously-organized, goal-driven mechanism will be taken.

#### **4. Democracy and Parliamentarism**

Social democratic doctrine never concerned itself with the problem of discovering the political forms its power would assume after having reached its goal. The beginning of the proletarian revolution has provided the practical answer to this question, thanks to the events themselves. This practice of the first stages of the revolution has enormously increased our ability to understand the essence and the future path of the revolution; it has enormously clarified our intuitions and contributed new perspectives on a matter which was previously vaguely outlined in a distant haze. These new intuitions constitute the most important difference between social democracy and communism. If communism, in the points discussed above, signifies faithfulness to and the correct extension of the best social democratic theories, now, thanks to its new perspectives, it rises above the old theories of socialism. In this theory of communism, Marxism undergoes an important extension and enrichment.

Up until now, only a few people were aware of the fact that radical social democracy had become so profoundly estranged from Marx's views in its concept of the State and revolution – which, furthermore, no one had even taken the trouble to discuss. Among the few exceptions, Lenin stands out. Only the victory of the Bolsheviks in 1917, and their dissolution of the National Assembly shortly afterwards, showed the socialists of Western Europe that a new principle was making its debut in Russia. And in Lenin's book, *The State and Revolution*, which was written in the summer of 1917 – although it only became available in Western Europe in the following year – one finds the foundations of the socialist theory of the State considered in the light of Marx's views.

The opposition between social democracy and the socialism we are now considering is often expressed in the slogan, "Democracy or Dictatorship". But the communists also consider their system to be a form of democracy. When the social democrats speak of democracy, they are referring to democracy as it is applied in parliamentarism; the communists oppose parliamentary or bourgeois democracy. What do they mean by these

terms?

Democracy means popular government, people's self-government. The popular masses themselves must administer their own affairs and determine them. Is this actually the case? The whole world knows the answer is no. The State apparatus rules and regulates everything; it governs the people, who are its subjects. In reality, the State apparatus is composed of the mass of officials and military personnel. Of course, in relation to all matters which affect the entire community, officials are necessary for carrying out administrative functions; but in our State, the servants of the people have become their masters. Social democracy is of the opinion that parliamentary democracy, due to the fact that it is the form of democracy where the people elect their government, is in a position – if the right people are elected – to make popular self-government a reality.

What really happens is clearly demonstrated by the experience of the new German republic. There can be no doubt that the masses of workers do not want to see the return of a triumphant capitalism. Even so, while in the elections there was no limitation of democracy, there was no military terrorism, and all the institutions of the reaction were powerless, despite all this the result was the reestablishment of the old oppression and exploitation, the preservation of capitalism. The communists had already warned of this and foresaw that, by way of parliamentary democracy, the liberation of the workers from their exploitation by capital would not be possible.

The popular masses express their power in elections. On election day, the masses are sovereign; they can impose their will by electing their representatives. On this one day, they are the masters. But woe to them if they do not choose the right representatives! During the entire term after the election, they are powerless. Once elected, the deputies and parliamentarians can decide everything. This democracy is not a government of the people themselves, but a government of parliamentarians, who are almost totally independent of the masses. To make them more responsive to a greater extent one could make proposals, such as, for example, holding new elections every year, or, even more radical, the right of recall (compulsory new elections at the request of a certain number of the eligible voters); naturally, however, no one is making such proposals. Of course, the parliamentarians cannot do just as they please, since four years later they will have to run for office again. But during that time they manipulate the masses, accustoming them to such general formulas and such demagogic phrases, in such a way that the masses are rendered absolutely incapable of exercising any kind of critical judgment. Do the voters, on election day, really choose appropriate representatives, who will carry out in their name the mandates for which they were elected? No; they only choose from among various persons previously selected by the political parties who have been made familiar to them in the party newspapers.

But let us assume that a large number of people are elected by the masses as the representatives of their true intentions and are sent to parliament. They meet there, but soon realize that the parliament does not govern; it only has the mission of passing the laws, but does not implement them. In the bourgeois State there is a separation of powers between making and executing the laws. The parliament possesses only the first power, while it is the second power which is really determinate; the real power, that of implementing the laws, is in the hands of the bureaucracy and the departments of the State, at whose summit is the government executive as the highest authority. This means that, in the democratic countries, the government personnel, the ministers, are designated by the parliamentary majority. In reality, however, they are not elected, they are nominated, behind closed doors with a lot of skullduggery and wheeling and dealing, by the leaders of the parties with a parliamentary majority. Even if there were to be an aspect of popular will manifested in the parliament, this would still not hold true in the

government.

In the personnel staffing the government offices, the popular will is to be found only – and there, in a weakened form mixed with other influences – alongside bureaucratism, which directly rules and dominates the people. But even the ministers are almost powerless against the organizations of the bureaucracy, who are nominally subordinate to them. The bureaucracy pulls all the strings and does all the work, not the ministers. It is the bureaucrats who remain in office and are still there when the next batch of elected politicians arrives in office. They rely on the ministers to defend them in parliament and to authorize funding for them, but if the ministers cross them, they will make life impossible for them.

This is the whole meaning of the social democratic concept of the workers being able to take power and overthrow capitalism by means of the normal rule of general suffrage. Do they really think they can make anyone believe that all of these functionaries, office workers, department administrators, confidential advisors, judges and officials high and low, will be capable of carrying out any sort of change on behalf of the freedom of the proletariat at the behest of the likes of Ebert and Scheidemann, or Dittmann and Ledebour? The bureaucracy, at the highest levels, belongs to the same class as the exploiters of the workers, and in its middle layers as well as in its lowest ranks its members all enjoy a secure and privileged position compared to the rest of the population. This is why they feel solidarity with the ruling layers which belong to the bourgeoisie, and are linked to them by a thousand invisible ties of education, family relationships and personal connections.

Perhaps the social democratic leaders have come to believe that, by taking the place of the previous government ministers, they could pave the way to socialism by passing new laws. In reality, however, nothing has changed in the State apparatus and the system of power as a result of this change of government personnel. And the fact that these gentlemen do not want to admit that this is indeed the case is proven by the fact that their only concern has been to occupy the government posts, believing that, with this change of personnel, the revolution is over. This is made equally clear by the fact that the modern organizations created by the proletariat have, under their leadership, a statist character and smell about them, like the State but on a smaller scale: the former servants, now officials, have promoted themselves to masters; they have created a dense bureaucracy, with its own interests, which displays – in an even more accentuated form – the character of the bourgeois parliaments at the commanding heights of their respective parties and groups, which only express the impotence of the masses of their memberships.

Are we therefore saying that the use of parliament and the struggle for democracy is a false tactic of social democracy? We all know that, under the rule of a powerful and still unchallenged capitalism, the parliamentary struggle can be a means of arousing and awakening class consciousness, and has indeed done so, and even Liebknecht used it that way during the war. But it is for that very reason that the specific character of democratic parliamentarism cannot be ignored. It has calmed the combative spirit of the masses, it has inculcated them with the false belief that they were in control of the situation and squelched any thoughts of rebellion which may have arisen among them. It performed invaluable services for capitalism, allowing it to develop peacefully and without turmoil. Naturally, capitalism had to adopt the especially harmful formula of deceit and demagoguery in the parliamentary struggle, in order to fulfill its aim of driving the population to insanity. And now the parliamentary democracy is performing a yet greater service for capitalism, as it is enrolling the workers' organizations in the effort to save capitalism.

Capitalism has been quite considerably weakened, materially and morally, during the world war, and will only be able to survive if the workers themselves once again help it to

get back on its feet. The social democratic labor leaders are elected as government ministers, because only the authority inherited from their party and the mirage of the promise of socialism could keep the workers pacified, until the old State order could be sufficiently reinforced. This is the role and the purpose of democracy, of parliamentary democracy, in this period in which it is not a question of the advent of socialism, but of its prevention. Democracy cannot free the workers, it can only plunge them deeper into slavery, diverting their attention from the genuine path to freedom; it does not facilitate but blocks the revolution, reinforcing the bourgeoisie's capacity for resistance and making the struggle for socialism a more difficult, costly and time-consuming task for the proletariat.

### **5. Proletarian Democracy, or the Council System**

Social democracy believed that the conquest of political power by the proletariat had to take the form of a seizure of the power of the State apparatus by the workers' party. This was why socialism had to leave the State apparatus intact, to place it at the service of the working class. Marxists, including Kautsky, also shared this belief.

Marx and Engels viewed the State as the violent machinery of oppression created by the ruling class and then perfected and further developed during the 19th century as the proletariat's revolt grew stronger. Marx thought that the task of the proletariat consisted in the destruction of this State apparatus and the creation of completely new administrative organs. He was well aware of the fact that the State exercises many functions which, at first sight, benefit the general interest – public safety, the regulation of trade, education, administration – but he also knew that all of these activities were subordinated to the overriding goal of securing the interests of capital, of assuring its power. This is why he never succumbed to the fantasy that this machinery of repression could ever become an organ of popular liberation, while preserving its other functions. The proletariat must provide itself with its own instrument of liberation.

It seemed that this instrument could not be identified prior to its actual appearance; only practice could unveil it. This became possible for the first time in the Paris Commune of 1871, when the proletariat conquered State power. In the Commune, the citizens and workers of Paris elected a parliament after the old model, but this parliament was immediately transformed into something quite unlike our parliament. Its purpose was not to entertain the people with fine words while allowing a small clique of businessmen and capitalists to preserve their private property; the men who met in the new parliament had to publicly regulate and administer everything on behalf of the people. What had been a parliamentary corporation was transformed into a corporation of labor; it formed committees which were responsible for framing new legislation. In this manner, the bureaucracy as a special class, independent of and ruling over the people, disappeared, thereby abolishing the separation of legislative and executive powers. Those persons who occupied the highest posts over the people were at the same time elected by and representatives of the people themselves who put them in office, and could at any time be removed from office by their electors.

The short life of the Paris Commune did not permit a complete development of this new concept; it arose, so to speak, instinctively, within the feverish struggle for existence. It was Marx's brilliant perspicacity that caused it to be recognized as the embryonic form of the future forms of the State power of the proletariat. A new and important step was taken in 1905 in Russia, with the establishment of councils, or soviets, as organs of expression of the fighting proletariat. These organs did not conquer political power, although the Saint Petersburg central workers' council assumed the leadership of the struggle, and exercised considerable power. When the new revolution broke out in 1917, the soviets were once again constructed, this time as organs of proletarian power. With

the German November Revolution the proletariat took political control of the country and provided the second historical example of proletarian State power. It was in the Russian example, however, that the political forms and principles the proletariat needs to achieve socialism were most clearly presented. These are the principles of communism as opposed to those of social democracy.

The first principle is that of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Marx repeatedly maintained that the proletariat, immediately after taking power, must establish its dictatorship. By dictatorship he meant workers' power to the exclusion of the other classes. This assertion provoked many protests: justice prohibits such a dictatorship, which privileges certain groups above others which are denied their rights, and instead requires democracy and equality before the law for everyone. But this is not at all the case: each class understands justice and rights to mean what is good or bad for it; the exploiter complains of injustice when he is put to work. In other times, when the proud aristocrat or the rich and arrogant bourgeois scornfully looked down with repugnance upon the idea of political equality and political rights for the slaves who toiled in the worst, most downtrodden and degrading jobs, in those times it was a sign full of meaning for the honor of the men who were beginning to rebel, when in their status as proletarians they rose up against the status quo and said: we have the same rights as you.

The democratic principle was the first display of the emergence of the class consciousness of the working class, which did not yet dare to say: I was nothing, but I want to be everything. If the community of all the workers wants to rule and make all the decisions about public affairs, and to be responsible for everything, then will I have to hear about "natural" or heaven-sent rights from all the criminals, thieves, pickpockets, all those who eat at the expense of their fellow men, the war profiteers, black market speculators, landowners, moneylenders, rentiers, all those who live off the labor of others without doing any work themselves? If it is true that each person has a natural right to participate in politics, it is no less true that the whole world has a natural right to live and not to die from hunger. And, if to assure the latter, the former must be curtailed, then no one should feel that their democratic sensibilities have been violated.

Communism is not based on any particular abstract right, but on the needs of the social order. The proletariat has the task of organizing social production in a socialist manner and regulating labor in a new way. But then it clashes with the powerful resistance of the ruling class. The latter will do everything within its power to prevent or impede the advent of the new order: this is why the ruling class must be excluded from exercising any political influence whatsoever. If one class wants to go forward, and the other wants to go backward, the car will not leave the station; any attempt at cooperation will bring society to a standstill. During the first phase of capitalism, when it needed to fortify its position as a newly-risen class, the bourgeoisie built its dictatorship upon the foundation of property qualifications for voter eligibility. Later it was compelled to change to democracy, granting the appearance of equal rights to the workers, which pacified them; but this democratic form did not affect the authentic class dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, but only disguised it, even if it gave the growing proletariat the opportunity to assemble and to recognize its class interests.

After the initial victory of the proletariat, the bourgeoisie retained many means of power, of both a material and a spiritual nature, at its disposal, which will obviously be employed in an effort to impede the progress of the new order, and may be able to paralyze it, if full political freedom is conceded to the bourgeoisie. It will therefore be necessary to shackle this class with the strongest measures of compulsion, and to mercilessly punish, as a grave crime against the vital interests of the people, any attempt to restrain or to impede the new organization of the economy.

It may seem that the exclusion of a particular class always has something of the unjust and arbitrary about it. From the point of view of the parliamentary system, this may be so. But, given the special organization of the proletarian State, the council system automatically, so to speak, causes all exploiters and parasites to be self-excluded from participation in the regulation of society.

The council system constitutes the second principle of the communist order. In the council system, political organization is built upon the economic process of labor. Parliamentarism rests upon the individual in his quality as a citizen of the State. This had its historical justification, since bourgeois society was originally composed of producers who were equal in respect to one another, each one of whom produced his commodities himself and together formed, through the sum of all their little transactions, the production process as a whole. But in modern society, with its giant industrial complexes and its class antagonisms, this basis is becoming increasingly obsolete. From this point of view, the theoreticians of French syndicalism (Lagardelle, for example) were correct in their harsh critique of parliamentarism. Parliamentary theory views each man primarily as a citizen of the State, and as such, individuals thereby come to be abstract entities, all of them equal. But in practice, the real, concrete man is a worker. His activity is the practical content of his life, and the activities of all men together form the social labor process as a whole.

It is neither the State nor politics, but society and labor, which constitute the great living community of man. In order to unite men in groups, parliamentary political practice divides the State into electoral districts; but the men who are assigned to these districts, workers, landlords, street peddlers, manufacturers, landowners, members of every class and every trade, haphazardly lumped together due to the purely accidental fact of their place of residence, can by no means arrive at a communitarian representation of their common interest and will, because they have nothing in common. The natural groups are production groups, the workers of a factory, who take part in the same activity, the peasants in a village, and, on a larger scale, the classes.

It is of course true that certain political parties recruit people principally from certain classes, whom they represent, although incompletely. Belonging to a party is primarily a matter of political convictions rather than one's class: a large part of the proletariat has always sought its political representatives from other parties besides social democracy.

The new society makes labor and its organization the conscious focus and foundation of all political life, where "political" refers to the outward arrangement of economic life. Under capitalism, this is expressed in an occult fashion, but in the future society it will take on an open and evident expression. People themselves act directly within their work groups. The workers in a factory elect one of their comrades as a representative of their will, who remains in continual contact with them, and can at any time be replaced by another. The delegates are responsible for decisions concerning everything within their competence and hold meetings whose composition varies according to whether the agenda is about matters relating to a particular profession, or a particular district, and so forth. It is from among these delegates that the central directive bodies arise in each area.

Within such institutions there is no room for any kind of representation for the bourgeoisie; whoever does not work as a member of a production group is automatically barred from the possibility of being part of the decision-making process, without needing to be excluded by formal voting arrangements. On the other hand, the former bourgeois who collaborates in the new society according to his abilities, as the manager of a factory, for example, can make his voice heard in the factory assemblies and will have the same decision-making power as any other worker. The professions concerned with general

cultural functions such as teachers or doctors, form their own councils, which make decisions in their respective fields of education and health in conjunction with the representatives of the workers in these fields, which are thus managed and regulated by all. In every domain of society, the means employed is self-management and organization from below, to mobilize all the forces of the people for the great objective; at the summit, these forces of the people are joined together in a central governing body, which guarantees their proper utilization.

The council system is a state organization without the bureaucracy of permanent officials which makes the State an alien power separate from the people. The council system realizes Friedrich Engels' assertion that government over people will give way to administration over things. Official posts (which are always necessary for administration) which are not especially crucial will be accessible to anyone who has undergone an elementary training program. The higher administration is in the hands of elected delegates, subject to immediate recall, who are paid the same wage as a worker. It could happen that during the transition period this principle may not be totally and consistently implemented, since the necessary abilities will not be found in every delegate all the time; but when the bourgeois press deliberately goes to grotesque lengths in its praise for the abilities of today's bureaucratic system, it is worth recalling the fact that, in November 1918, the workers and soldiers councils successfully carried out formidable tasks before which the State and military bureaucracies quailed.

Since the councils combine the tasks of management and execution, and since the delegates themselves must carry out the decisions they make, there is no place for bureaucrats or career politicians, both of which are denizens of the institutions of bourgeois State power. The goal of every political party, that is, of every organization of professional politicians, is to be able to take the State machinery into its hands; this goal is foreign to the Communist Party. The purpose of the latter is not the conquest of power for itself, but to show the goal and the way forward to the fighting proletariat, by means of the dissemination of communist principles, towards the end of establishing the system of workers' councils.

On this point, finally, social democracy and communism are opposed with respect to their immediate practical aims: the first seeks the reorganization of the old bourgeois State; the second, a new political system.

## Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| 1. The Road Followed by the Workers' Movement . . . . .   | 1  |
| 2. Class Struggle and Socialization . . . . .             | 3  |
| 3. Mass Action and Revolution . . . . .                   | 6  |
| 4. Democracy and Parliamentarism . . . . .                | 9  |
| 5. Proletarian Democracy, or the Council System . . . . . | 12 |