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The general strike and classical Marxism

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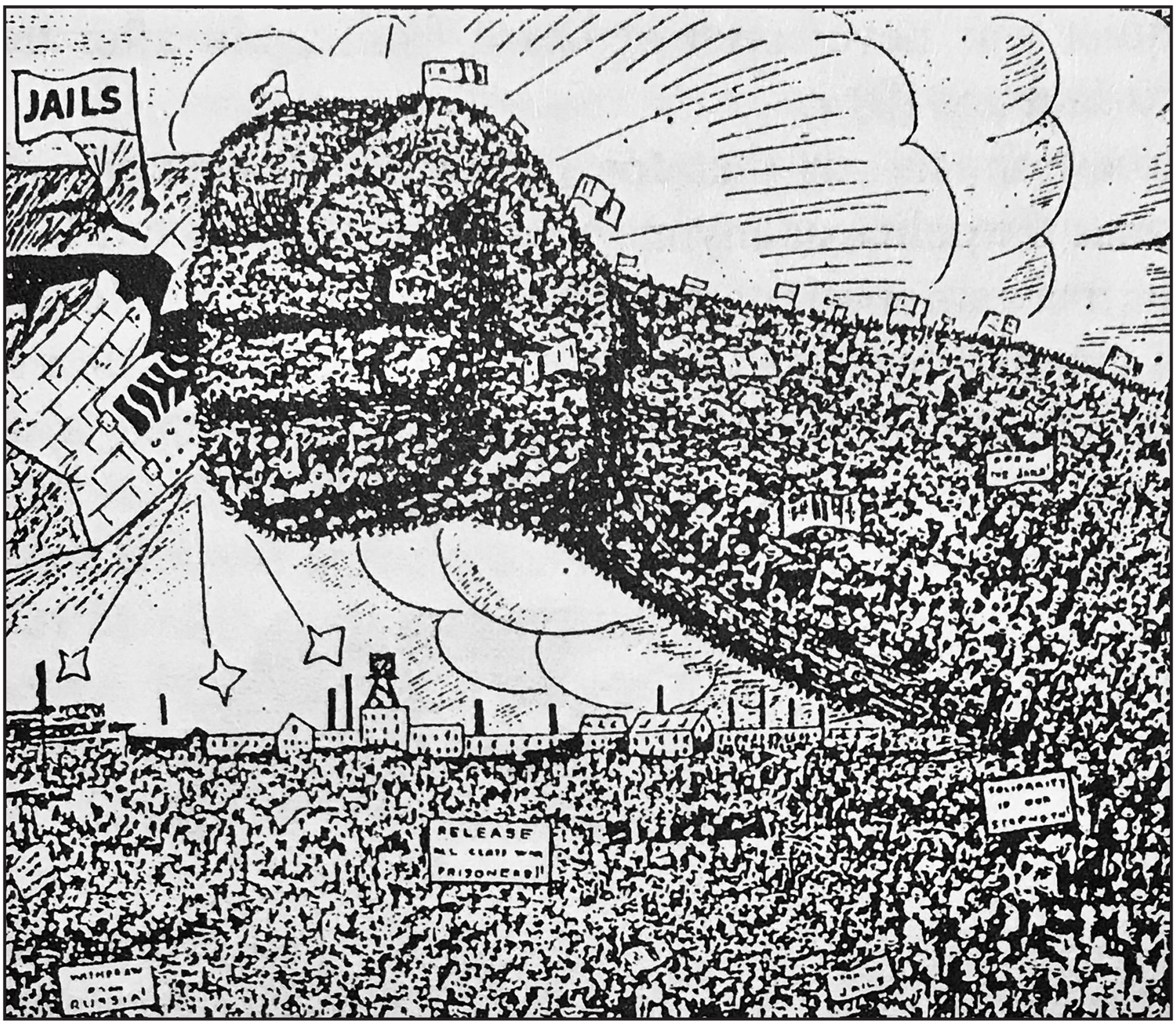

Non-class societies provide us with evidence of what might be called general strikes. Chris Knight, the radical anthropologist, argues in his book, *Blood relations* (1991), that tens of thousands of years ago there was a female sex strike. A revolutionary act, supported by brothers and sons, which he says ended alpha-male domination and allowed for the transition to an egalitarian original communism that was maintained by locking human society into the phases of the moon and an on/off cycle of celebration, sex strike and hunting. Original communism, along with the lunar-synchronised cycle of celebration, sex strike and hunting, still existing today in Africa with the Hadza, Mbuti, Mbendjele, Yaka and other such peoples.

And, although it is completely non-historic (maybe pacifist invention?), Aristophanes' play *Lysistrata* speaks for itself. It has a storyline centred on similar collective action by the wives of the Athenian citizenry during the Peloponnesian war with Sparta. Surely this was more than a farcical invention designed to get belly laughs from the all-male audiences at the Theatre of Dionysus; for sexual gratification they were free to use force on their wives and slaves; besides that, they had ready access to prostitutes or, for the more wealthy, *hetairai* courtesans. Every fiction has a grain of truth. Perhaps, in this case, a common folk memory of the gyneocracy, the time when women were supposed to have ruled society - a "traditional theme" in Greek myth and art.[1]

Engels, it will be recalled, put forward the idea that original communism involved not the rule of women, but the equality of men and women - something which came to an end through the emergence of classes and the "world historical defeat of the female sex".[2] In other words, the Neolithic counterrevolution.

When it comes to pre-capitalist *class* society, there are all manner of references to strike action. The pyramid builders in ancient Egypt repeatedly struck to secure improved rations and living conditions in the necropolis. Scraps of papyrus dating from the New Kingdom, circa 1550-1080 BCE, provide the "first known fully documented evidence of collective action by a workforce". [3] Exhausted state slaves of Athens also struck and occupied the silver mines of Laurium in 135-33 BCE.[4] The cradle of western civilisation had them walled in and left to starve.

In the ancient Roman world there appear to have been frequent strikes by well organised workers, such as bakers, shippers and quarrymen - though, admittedly, the textual evidence is frustratingly thin.[5] Apprentices

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and journeymen - with the coordination provided by their well-established societies - struck and won real advances in the towns of feudal Europe, that is for sure. Nevertheless their strikes were little more than small acts of rebellion within a highly fragmented, workshop-based, patriarchal system of craft production. Other guild masters regarded them as not much more than family squabbles - irritating examples that others might follow. Writing about pre-industrial-revolution England, Edward Thompson makes the telling point that such "insubordination of the poor was an inconvenience; it was not a menace".[6]

The most powerful weapon employed by those below during ancient and feudal times was not the strike. From Spartacus to Wat Tyler, from Jesus of Nazareth to Thomas Müntzer, the popular classes punctured the supposedly seamless fabric of official society with utopian and sometimes despairing revolt - riot in the city, *jacquerie* in the countryside. Such uprisings could on occasion force upon the upper classes conditions which they regarded as onerous - not the least of which was democracy. However, for all their rights, the *male* Athenian peasant-citizen, the *male* Roman plebeian and the *male* Icelandic yeoman farmer existed in a subordinate position within an oligarchical, slave-owning system.

There was the constant danger of aristocrats by birth or wealth regaining their unrestricted rule. Certainly because of economic geography the peasantry is constantly dispersed.[7] So, even when united revolt overcomes the tyranny of distance, the moment of collective triumph over the manor or town often proves fleeting. Peasants are pulled back to helpless separation by the irresistible need to plough, sow and harvest - that or starve. The rulers deserved to fail. But, even when the ruled successfully revolted, they could not provide a viable economic alternative which abolished the reproduction of class relations.

The nascent bourgeoisie - economically a powerful element within the nexus of dissolving feudalism - introduced a dynamic element into the never-ending cycle of primitive revolt. When money *did not* serve them better, when there seemed no other way, the bourgeoisie was quite prepared to smash, terrorise and overturn. To perform such a political act the bourgeoisie needed a universal philosophy of emancipation. To remove kingly, aristocratic and church barriers to their developing economic order the bourgeoisie formed itself into a class of liberators. It not only put men of action - Oldenbarnevelt, Cromwell, Washington, Robespierre, Garibaldi - at the head of the *popular* movement. It used preachers, poets and pamphleteers - Calvin, Voltaire, Milton, Paine - as the "enchanter's wand" to inspire the masses with promises of heaven on earth.

Hence the classic form of the *bourgeois revolution* was the barricade behind which stood the people who had been won to believe that they were fighting for *liberté*, *fraternité* and *égalité* or - given different times and countries - something equivalent to it. Yet, whatever the dreams in their heads, objectively, while they remained under bourgeois hegemony, the participants fought for not the rights of man, but public debt, a home market and a system of unrestricted exploitation.

Haunting the rise of the bourgeoisie and the consolidation of the capitalist state - whether monarchical or plutocratic - was the ever-present threat of popular democracy. Levellers and *sans culottes* wanted a political system that would have greatly curbed the power of capital. However, the biggest threat to capitalism was its own creation - the modern proletariat. Sucked into factories, mines and mills by the never-ending and most elementary needs of capital, the 'formless multitude' was transformed not only by a new common relationship *to capital*, but into a class because of a common struggle *against capital*.

Marx explains that "separate individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry on a common battle against another class; otherwise they are on hostile terms with each other as competitors".[8] For workers then, it was not only material conditions of everyday life - housing, education, leisure and work - which pulled them into becoming a class: it was the war against capital, beginning with combinations to limit competition between themselves as otherwise atomised sellers of labour-power. EP Thompson reckons that the working class was formed through self-making economic, political and cultural struggles between 1780 and 1832; by which time "most English working people came to feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers".[9]

Marx and Engels were among the first to grasp the *universal* nature of this new class. Uniquely, because of its place in history and relationship, not only to other classes, but to the means of production, it had an inescapable interest beyond improving its own immediate lot. Precisely because of its own condition, the working class tends towards collective organisation and collective long-term solutions. Certainly to end its position as a class of wage-slaves, workers are compelled to form themselves into a revolutionary party which has the aim of abolishing all classes and therefore liberating all of humanity, regardless of nationality or sex.

Those who own no means of production, only their ability to work, have a ready (and for them a self-evident) weapon at hand to achieve their ends: the collective withdrawal of labour-power. That does not mean that, once a strike begins, there exists a pre-set mechanism which operates to take workers up an inexorable series of organisational, political and ideological steps, which culminates in the socialist order.

In and of itself, what Marx called, in his pamphlet *Wages, price and profit*, the "incessant struggle" in the workplace, can only be a matter of to-and-fro struggles with capital.[10] No different, in essence, to the to-and-fro struggles of slaves, peasants and artisans of previous ages. That explains why during the early stages of capitalism, communistic philosophers - eg, Fourier, Owen, Saint-Simon - *limited* themselves to utopian dreams about what society *ought* to be like. The working class had yet to constitute itself as a militant class in its own right. But, once it had, the *real* movement began to develop a capability for qualitative self-development.[11]

When it came to this real movement, both Marx and Engels stressed the relationship and yet at the same time the difference between economic and political struggles. The strike to compel a particular employer, or group of employers, to increase wages or reduce hours is, and will remain, a purely economic struggle, and therefore be a containable movement of the underclass. On the other hand, the strike to achieve a lower legal limit on the working day for everyone is *political*, because it has as its aim the enforcement of interests "in a general form, in a form possessing general, socially binding force".[12] Not that there is an 'either-or' situation.

The political movement of the working class only comes about because there has already been a certain degree of previous economic organisation. Through the *training* provided by *separate* economic struggles, the conditions are provided for building a *political* movement which allows the working class to take on the state apparatus.

Capitalism in part does this spontaneously. With the concentration and centralisation of production workers come to possess a huge, latent economic and therefore political power. One point, one area, one branch of production relies and is connected with another in a mosaic of national and global interdependence. Strikes affect the immediate employers. They also, if *generalised*, threaten not only the profits of other individual capitalists, but the "collective power: ie, the political power of the ruling classes".[13]

Having been cleaved into separate categories by the rise of capitalism, economics and politics come together once again in the working class (the class that can become both the subject and object of history). After even the first few steps the *generalised* economic struggle takes on new dimensions. Met by the collective power of the employers, where anti-trade union laws can be invoked, the police brought in, fighting in an integrated economy which allows for production to be transferred and scabbing, workers are more than predisposed to develop their own class politics.

Marx and Engels

Throughout their political lives Marx and Engels, the founders of scientific communism, intransigently fought against the proposition that the working class could liberate itself by the simple device of staging one big strike. Given the division of labour that existed between them, it was invariably the latter who took the lead in the associated polemics.

On a number of occasions Engels understandably referred back to his book - published in 1845 when he was only in his mid-20s - *The condition of the working class in England.* We shall do the same. In it, after all, Engels dealt with how, in 1839, the world's first proletarian party, the British Chartists, agreed a resolution calling for a 'holy month'. This had nothing to do with any worship of the godhead. It was a proposed month-long general strike, which would - or so its advocates thought - be more than enough to get the Tory government to meet their (in effect, given the circumstances) *revolutionary* demands for universal male suffrage, secret voting, annual parliaments and paid MPs.[14]

Ironically, again as explained in Engels' book, it was the bourgeoisie of industrial northern England who were *consciously* responsible for putting the 'holy month' to the test in July 1842. It was not, Engels said, that workers were gagging for strike action: rather it was the industrial bourgeoisie "who wished to close their mills and send the operatives into the country parishes upon the property of the aristocracy".[15] Putting aside their social contract with the aristocracy and their law-abiding creed of moral persuasion, the industrial bourgeoisie seems to have provoked, or taken advantage of, a general strike in order to use the working class as pawns. Unleashing proletarian anger was meant, in Richard Cobden's words, to "frighten the aristocracy" - so much so that it would bow before demands for the repeal of the Corn Laws[16] and in the process bring the industrial bourgeoisie one step nearer the day when it could finally crown itself *the governing* class.[17]

Predictably, because the industrial bourgeoisie and their Anti-Corn Law League led from behind; because for those below there was no clear goal in mind; because the workers were driven into revolt by a plan hatched from above; because none wished to be shot for the sake of ending the Corn Laws; the whole thing did not take long to fizzle out. For our purposes, however, it is particularly germane that at its height the general strike of 1842 "involved up to half a million workers and covered an area which stretched from Dundee and the Scottish coalfields to south Wales and Cornwall".[18] An independent working class politics was being forged - politics which went much further than those resulting from the simple antagonism that is by definition endemic between employer and employee.

Economic demands were joined with demands "for the revolutionary transformation of society".[19] As well as striking against pay cuts and short-time working, drawing the plugs from mill steam engines and 'sweeping' out those still in the factories, workers burnt the property of those they hated and stormed workhouses - loathed by the poor and loved by the free-market liberals. The propertyless were threatening "the destruction of those who had property", howled Lord Chief Justice, Thomas Denman.[20] Led by Thomas Cooper, a minority argued that there ought to be a physical-force insurrection to carry through the Chartist programme. The majority around Fergus O'Conner agreed, but considered such a move premature.[21]

For the industrial bourgeoisie it was all too much. Having been released and shown itself self-willed, uncontrollable and dangerous, the proletariat had to be returned to the factory floor and the dictatorship of capital. The industrial bourgeoisie resumed a constitutional stance, abandoned its last Jacobin vestiges and moved to place itself at the service of the Peelite government. Its trusted retainers were armed and sworn in as special constables and in Preston were given the command to fire upon the crowd. The unintentional general strike therefore stood opposed not only by the government, but all exploiting classes.

Arising from the events of July 1842 a number of Chartists were arrested, prosecuted and found guilty. There were, however, positive outcomes. Crucially, the industrial bourgeoisie and the working class "decisively" separated.[22] Chartism freed itself from bourgeois hangers-on and became a purely proletarian movement. The industrial bourgeoisie had burnt its fingers trying to manipulate working class revolution. Chastised, it refused any longer to listen to physical-force talk. Fear of the working class now weighed more heavily than dissatisfaction with the governing landed aristocracy.

Polemic with anarchists

Despite the *negative* experience of history's first proletarian general strike, the idea was taken up by socialists in France and Belgium after the failure of the 1848 revolutions. That said, it was the anarchists, under the leadership of Mikhail Bakunin, who in the 1860s and 70s made the general strike *strategy* their own.[23]

The general strike was to be their mechanism whereby the social revolution would be kick-started. Instead of patiently educating the working class, using every electoral opportunity, slowly building up their organisations - which supposedly inevitably end up under the control of a bureaucracy and hence the bourgeoisie - the anarchists proposed a general strike. A strike becomes a strike wave and in turn becomes a general strike and "can result only in a great cataclysm, which forces society to shed its old skin". A general strike uniting all workers "across political boundaries and professions" paralyses the government and sees the workers abolishing the state and replacing that monstrous abomination with a "federation" of tiny local communes.[24]

Engels tore into this *abstract* perspective, not least in his pamphlet *The Bakuninists at work* (1873). "One fine morning," he mocked, the anarchists imagine

> … all the workers in all the industries of a country, or even of the whole world, stop work, thus forcing the propertied classes either humbly to submit within four weeks at most, or to attack the workers, who would then have the right to defend themselves and use the opportunity to pull down the entire old society.[25]

Evidently, *The Bakuninists* was written in a rush. Engels simply repeated his arguments against the 1839 Chartists and their holy month. Hence his attack on the general strike needing perfect organisation and a full war chest. Engels, of course, had no problem in pointing out the problems with such a strategy. On the one hand, no government would sit idly by, while workers religiously accumulated their pennies for such a grand project. Surely there would be legislation, arrests, confiscations, the mobilisation of troops. On the other hand, almost by definition, the *real* class struggle would bring about the liberation of the working class long before any perfect organisation, along with its colossal reserves of funds, had ever been achieved. Furthermore, if by some strange quirk such an organisation had been built, then surely there would be no need for the "roundabout way of the general strike" in order to attain the objects of the working class. Here was the reasoning that shaped the Marxist approach to the general strike strategy and which went on to inform the attitude of the Second International (see below).

In fact, the anarchists did not bank on one big strike. Instead they banked on many strikes, maybe only supported by a tiny minority of workers to begin with, spontaneously *becoming* a general strike. Either way, the 1873 events in Spain gave, for Engels, an "unsurpassed example of how a revolution should *not* be made". Here, after all, was a country where the anarchists enjoyed a considerable influence. Eg, they controlled the Spanish section of the International Working Men's Association, the First International.

Faced with a living revolutionary situation, the anarchists were compelled to ditch virtually their entire programme. Instead of abstaining from political and electoral activity and abolishing the state, they constituted themselves as an impotent rump within an archipelago of patently bourgeois cantonal governments. Finding themselves drawn into useless, senseless and uncoordinated uprisings, their only remaining so-called principle of federation and local autonomy gave counterrevolution the initiative and allowed it to concentrate its forces and crush one town at a time before turning to the next.

Obviously anarchist politics stood in flat contradistinction to the needs of the real movement of the working class. Yet, even as the Spanish fiasco unfolded, the general strike still formed the centrepiece of their strategic thinking. Meeting in Geneva, in September 1873, the congress of the anarchist Alliance of Social Democracy - now presenting themselves as anti-Marxist 'libertarians' - agreed a perspective, proposed by the Belgium section, whereby a mass strike wave provides "a means of bringing a movement onto the street and leading the workers to the barricades". Because such essentially unplanned outbursts risk isolation, the anarchists understandably rely on spontaneity to spread things - "The revolution has to be contagious".[26]

Although the Alliance of Social Democracy - the Bakuninist public front - had been formally dissolved in April 1869, there can be no escaping the fact that the anarchists had an outlook and method of organisation that was profoundly manipulative, dishonest and, frankly, dangerous. Despite painting themselves as lovers of freedom - ie, libertarians - nothing could be further from the truth. There were (still are) plenty of honest dupes. But in the case of Bakunin (and his successors), while the general-strike revolution would supposedly see the abolition of the state, in actual fact it comes back - at least in the (often secret) schemas - through the back door.

Behind the public fronts there operates an elite core of self-appointed initiates. In Bakunin's time these "invisible dictators" were called the "International Brotherhood". So, for all the talk of bottom-up free association and the destruction of authoritarianism, there was a highly centralised group - well, at least in theory - who were to be the real controllers. We still see this in 'horizontal organisations' such as the Women's Liberation Movement, Occupy, Black Lives Matter, etc, etc. As Jo Freeman showed in her *Tyranny of structurelessness* (1972), there is always, a small, usually self-appointed, group which makes the big decisions.

Understandably, given this, Bakunin's vision of the future is despotic, to put it mildly. There would be communal living, communal eating, communal sleeping. There would be forced labour and restrictions on free movement too. Assessors check on everything and above the whole ghastly monstrosity, pulling the strings, there is the supreme controller himself. Think of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. No wonder that the Marx-Engels team dubbed Bakunin's future schema "barrack-room communism".[27]

Second International

Formed in 1889, the Second International expanded at a fantastic pace. By the early years of the 20th century it included within its ranks mass working class parties throughout Europe (they were, with the notable exception of the Labour Party in Britain, built on the model of the German Social Democratic Party). Members were counted in the tens, the hundreds of thousands, voters in their millions. The Second International constituted a world power in its own right. For example, in July 1889, May Day was initiated as an "international demonstration", which meant in many cases an annual work stoppage: ie, a 24-hour general strike (though that particular phrase was never used).[28]

Unlike the First International, which was a much smaller, but very broad affair (embracing not only Marxists, but Proudhonists, Blanquists, Owenites, British trade unionists, as well as anarchists), the Second International accepted Marxism as its *natural* world outlook. British Labourism was treated like a childish giant, which had yet to learn to think and act like the grown-up continental Europeans. Bakuninism, however, found itself excluded, losing almost all the influence it once enjoyed.[29]

That said, there was a reinterpretation of Bakuninism by the anarcho-syndicalists. They accepted partial strike struggles and this allowed for the building of big trade union confederations, such as the CNT in Spain and the CGT in France. However, anarcho-syndicalists still upheld the general strike as the workers' "strongest weapon in the struggle for their social liberation" (Rudolf Rocker).[30] And, naturally, organising the working class into a political party, standing candidates in local and parliamentary elections and fighting for a workers' state, even a semi-state, was rejected out of hand, as a matter of 'high principle'. Instead it was the revolutionary trade union which constituted both means and ends.

More than that, there was a sort of anarchist reflux within Marxism. Thinkers - most notably, Georges Sorel - despised parliamentary democracy, recommended the power of myth, direct action, regenerative violence and the *proletarian* general strike (as opposed to the *political* general strike) as key to bringing about the revolution.[31] A perspective Sorel contrasted with what he called the "decomposition of Marxism", and the allegedly scientistic, evolutionary, deterministic Marxism of Karl Kautsky and others in the German SDP.[32]

Similar arguments were put forward in the Socialist Party in Italy by Arturo Labriola and Benito Mussolini - later a fascist, true, but in the pre-World War I period a leader of the 'direct action' left. In Germany, Robert Michels' book *Political parties* was written as an anarcho-Marxist critique of the SPD. Michels himself became a fascist in the inter-war period, but, despite that, his book still serves as a "standard textbook" of US political science courses - "an instrument to make students believe that all politics is about manipulations by small elites".[33]

Not that the Second International was without problems. No, on the contrary. The Second International grew in a period of social peace - fertile conditions for many of its functionaries, parliamentarians, newspaper editors and trade union leaders to become habituated to the electoral, parliamentary and trade union routine. Too many paid lip-service to Marxism, but wanted to forget *revolutionary* Marxism with its terrible phrases such as 'smashing the existing state machine' and 'the dictatorship of the proletariat', not to mention the need to guard principles and combat opportunism. Too many wanted to remember only how Marx and Engels urged patience, the slow business of building mass organisations, the use every electoral opportunity and how Marx and Engels attacked the anarchists, not least over their dreams of the general strike making the revolution.

It is true that in 1891 and 1893 Belgian workers staged two 24-hour general strikes to force the government to extend the franchise; that in 1903 a strike on the Netherlands railways grew into a brief general strike; that in Italy, in 1904, a wave of violent strikes saw street fighting in several cities. Nevertheless, among most theoreticians and leaders of the Second International, the general strike was seen as akin to anarchism, a primitive or utopian strategy associated with the early stages of the movement. In that spirit Ignaz Auer, secretary of the German SDP, coined the catchphrase, "*Generalstreik ist Generalunsinn*" ('General strike is general lunacy').[34]

The Russian revolution of 1905 changed all that. It anticipated the end of capitalism's peaceful period of development and the beginning of a period of wars and revolutions. It also catapulted the general strike question back to the forefront of political debate.

Russia 1905

Russia's first revolution started on January 9 1905, a cold and terrible Sunday.[35] Partially through stupidity, partially through premeditated plan, tsarist troops were ordered to open fire on the huge march led by the priest (and police dupe), Georgy Gapon. Pushed on by disgust with the futile Russo-Japanese war, mass deprivation and a crop of economic strikes, he had intended submitting a half humble and (because of social democratic agitation) half threatening petition to the 'little father' in his St Petersburg Winter Palace.

It listed almost every popular grievance and demand. Everything from workshops open to "draughts, rain and snow", withdrawal of the navy from abroad, the eight-hour day, "separation of church and state" to the convening of a constituent assembly, elected by "universal, secret and equal suffrage" - the "most important of our requests". In its final peroration the famous petition bluntly and ominously stated that there were only "two paths": either "happiness and freedom" or the "grave".[36] Tsarism horrifically proved it was the path to the grave. In the hail of bullets hundreds were killed, and thousands more injured.[37]

Gapon all of a sudden found himself world-famous. From afar his mix of Karl Marx and Ezekiel made him appear as some sort of new age leader. A *fakir* he was - but not one destined to be Russia's Gandhi, its Mahdi, its Makarios or its Khomeini. Even while his "halo of indignation" dazzled liberal opinion and his "pastor's curses" rained down on the tsar's head, the social democrats - ie, the communists - had emerged from the underground and after overcoming initial mistrust soon began to exert a decisive influence over the mass of workers. Initiative slipped from the petty bourgeois *celebrity*, the insubstantial Gapon, and passed to the proletarian *party*, the "politically conscious workers who had been through the school of socialism". Again in the words of one of its foremost future leaders - a certain Lev Bronstein - it formed "an iron ring" around Gapon: "a ring from which he could not have broken loose even if he had wanted to".[38] So it was not the naive Orthodox priest employed at a St Petersburg transit prison, but the working class, which was to be the tsar's nemesis.

The January 9 massacre - Bloody Sunday, as it instantly became known - provoked outrage and a rolling nationwide general strike. One million workers stopped work. They took to the streets and shook the tsar and the whole autocratic system to its foundations. Without any guiding strategy - in many cases without advancing any clear demands; stopping, starting, "obedient only to the instinct of solidarity" - for almost two months the "strike ruled the land".[39]

A spontaneous general strike wave such as January-February 1905 could only but exhaust itself. It had no ability to consummate itself in revolution. Moreover, the participants did not get strike pay. Such an action thus had physical limits determined by the workers' stomachs, not trade union coffers. The revolutionary situation, however, continued unabated. Breaking out here as peasant land seizures, there as sailors' mutiny and everywhere as street demonstrations and clashes with police and troops, the decisive moment was coming.

October was its herald. Trumpeted by a strike on the Moscow-Kazan railway, things quickly and enormously fanned out in terms of numbers, character and prospects. Isolated economic strikes again became general *political* strikes. Demonstrations united workers and radical students around revolutionary slogans.

Strike committees came together to establish workers' councils or soviets - organs of struggle - and, as Lenin was soon to appreciate, "embryonic forms of a new revolutionary authority".[40] Clearly the situation had changed since January. What was unconscious had, like the human embryo nine months after conception, become conscious. Now, the revolution possessed a guiding strategy. Now, it had clear political demands. Now, for the most advanced detachments, the call for general strike was *combined* with *preparation* for armed uprising. Responsibility for this qualitative development rested entirely with the Communist Party - the Bolshevik (majority) faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, as it was then known - and its power and prestige, which with every week and month grew in leaps and bounds.

To organise and make effective the sudden release of popular anger and surge of self-movement, Lenin had, quite rightly, almost straightaway, demanded the opening up of the party and mass recruitment, especially amongst young workers. That did not mean he rejected as wrong his ideas of building the party outlined in the celebrated 1902 pamphlet *What is to be done?* The party would still be built and directed top-down. But now centralism was to be complemented and completed with mass initiative and democracy from below.

The fact of the matter was that communists in Russia could, on the changed terrain, operate with considerable freedom. The battle lines had been shifted. The enemy's defences had been breached, its forces were in disarray and those of the workers were in rapid advance. Tsarism was powerless to prevent the spread of ideas and growth of the party. Exiles returned from Britain, Switzerland, France and Siberia as popular heroes. Party activists - formed until then without the oxygen of open mass activity and trained only by internal faction fights - no longer worked underground, no longer operated as persecuted committee men. Now they led and gave political clarity to an army of trade unions, student societies and workers' soviets, which had sprung up seemingly out of nothing. Standing before the people as tribunes of the oppressed, the communists addressed mass meetings by the score, legally published and widely circulated their literature, and in a moment encadred a generation - workers joined in their tens of thousands.[41]

Even before the beginning of Bolshevism as a faction in 1903, Lenin had argued that only a proletarian-led insurrection, with the mass of peasants behind it, could rid Russia of tsarism and carry through a social transformation. With the events of January 1905 and the revolutionary months that followed, *preparation* for this became a matter of urgent necessity. That meant arming the working class. The Mensheviks objected: "We have to arm the workers not with weapons, but first with the burning consciousness of the necessity of arming themselves."

The Bolsheviks gave an excellent answer: "You regard Russian workers as little children, you want to 'arm them with consciousness'; but that time has passed. They have the consciousness; now they need to be armed with rifles to strike at the tsar and the bourgeoisie."[42] Only an armed working class could defend themselves and their new-found freedoms. Only an armed working class could look to the future with confidence. Only an armed working class could win over sections of the tsarist army. As Lenin said,

> The sooner the proletariat succeeds in arming, and the longer it holds its fighting positions as striker and revolutionary, the sooner will the army begin to waver; more and more soldiers will at last begin to realise what they are doing and they will join sides with the people against the fiends, against the tyrant, against the murderers of defenceless workers and of their wives and children.[43]

If October was the herald, December was the decisive moment. Generalised political strikes once more broke out across the country. Demonstrations attracted ever greater numbers. Soviets began to exercise local power. The hour had arrived for nationwide insurrection. This time Moscow, not St Petersburg, was the torch-bearer. The St Petersburg soviet, first under the Menshevik, GS Khrustalev, and then under Trotsky - who had moved away from mainstream Menshevism only to inhabit a mushy middle ground between Menshevism and Bolshevism, with all the fudging, evasions and deceptions that involved - decided to hold back.[44]

Moscow did not. Its Bolshevik leadership had been getting ready for months. Workplace meetings had declared for an uprising. Fraternisation with the local garrison produced a soldiers' soviet. Party cells were established in the army; weapons illegally imported from abroad; workers instructed in their use. Fighting detachments were formed ... The class had been armed!

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Though members of the Moscow Bolshevik committee had just been arrested, the decision was made to go ahead. On December 7 it began. Key buildings were seized. Barricades webbed the city. Against enormous odds, but with the active support of its proletarian population, some thousand guerrillas broke the grip of tsarism in Moscow for nine days. Operating in small units of three or four, these *druzhinniki* (volunteers) "proved", in Lenin's words, that the "open armed struggle of the people is possible even against modern troops".[45]

Uprisings broke out in Krasnoyarsk, Motovilikha, Novorossisk, Sormovo, Sevastopol, Kronstadt, the Donets Basin, Georgia, Finland and Latvia. The Moscow garrison vacillated. Sadly no more. Having concluded a peace with Japan, the tsarist government managed to bring in substantial reinforcements. They were free of Bolshevik contamination. Officers gave instructions to spare no bullets and take no prisoners. Artillery was used to smash and blast buildings and barricades. Morale among the populus began to wane. The *druzhinniki* fought on. But, lacking an authoritative, directing centre, the uprising faltered and began to break apart into a series of disconnected defensive actions. The initiative was lost. A fatal weakness. Moscow was crushed. The other outposts of the revolutionary uprising followed.

Marx-Engels were right when back in 1882 they suggested that Russia was destined to become the world's revolutionary centre.[46] The December 1905 uprising was therefore not simply a local event. It was a precursor. Marx's old mole had resurfaced in Moscow. Where it would burrow next in time and space no one could tell, but clearly capitalism as a whole was facing a new general crisis. After over three decades, the era of peaceful parliamentarianism and trade unionism was coming to an end. A new era had arrived - an era of revolution. That meant new tasks and new tactics.

Marxism by definition learns from life. It organises, generalises and gives conscious expression to the struggles and creative developments brought about by the real movement itself. Unlike anarchists and reformists, Marxists have no ready-made formulas, nor a list of forbidden methods of struggle. In principle we positively recognise *all* tactical forms. So naturally, with its shattering of social peace, its soviets and its *new* general strike and barricade tactics, the 1905 revolution had a profound effect on Marxist thinking.[47] "There are," as Zinoviev said, "defeats which are more valuable than any victory."

The revolution had through its own momentum created alternative organs of power on the pattern of the 1871 Paris Commune: ie, workers' soviets. That this had been done with a general strike acting as midwife in no way refuted Marx and Engels. On the contrary, it bore out their method and showed that the anarchist strategy (including the strategy of the anarcho-syndicalists) of overthrowing the existing order *without* a political party was a non-starter. The land of Bakunin's birth provided an unsurpassed example of *how* to make a revolution. Yet no thanks to the thoroughly marginalised anarchists. It was the Marxists who led and gave the general strikes, mass demonstrations and urban uprisings their revolutionary programme.

Not only did the anarchists play no significant role whatsoever, but the idea of a general strike as a panacea was explicitly rejected. Having used the general strike as a *tactic*, "essential under *certain* conditions", its limitations were also recognised.[48]

The spontaneous general strike might have sounded the approach of revolution. However, even if led by the party, it could not take things all the way. To do that an armed uprising was necessary. That is why Lenin argued, in the course of the revolution, that as an "independent and predominant form of struggle" the general strike was "out of date". The *combination* of general strike with insurrection was needed. That was the main lesson Lenin sought to drive home, when it came to the *temporary* reunification of the Bolshevik and Menshevik wings of the RSDLP in 1906. In the "tactical platform for the unity congress" the Bolsheviks wanted amongst other points the following accepted:

> With further growth of the movement, the peaceful general strike proved inadequate, while partial recourse to it failed its aim and disorganised the forces of the proletariat ... In the present stage of the movement, the general political strike must be regarded not so much as an independent means of struggle as an auxiliary means in relation to insurrection; that therefore the timing of such a strike, and the choice of its place and of the industries it is to involve, should preferably depend upon the time and circumstances of the main form of struggle: namely, the armed uprising.[49]

Needless to say most Mensheviks were not prepared to accept any such thing. For Georgy Plekhanov, leader of the Mensheviks, the key lesson of the Moscow uprising was that "they should not have taken up arms"[50] - a view shared in no uncertain terms by the right wing of the SDP in Germany, which was still the most prestigious party in the Second International.

Those deputies in its large parliamentary fraction who had grown complacent in that self-important little world, those bureaucrats who had become dismissive of anything beyond the narrow confines of trade union politics, those who had succumbed to the blandishments of the bourgeoisie not only viewed with profound disquiet Moscow's barricades and guerrillas, but Russia's general strikes as well. Though social tensions were becoming more intense, general strikes would be completely out of place in the *Vaterland,* they chorused. True, the Jena congress of the party in 1905 adopted a resolution, moved by August Bebel, which agreed to the use of the general strike - but only in defence of the franchise! In the same year the Cologne trade union congress scandalously ruled out any discussion of the question. To do otherwise would be "playing with fire".[51]

Luxemburg

Those who paid lip service to Marxism, but feared the very idea of going beyond routine parliamentarianism and trade unionism, met a brilliantly deflating opponent in Rosa Luxemburg. After it had been fearfully sidelined by party and trade union leaderships, she was determined to reopen discussion on the general strike and take the whole issue to a higher level.

This she did not least in her *The mass strike, the political party and the trade unions* (1906) - a pamphlet usually simply referred to as *The mass strike*. The conclusions in it were different to Lenin's. In part that arose from whom they were out to convince. Lenin had no hesitation in enthusiastically embracing the general strike tactic. That said, his main concern was to emphasise to Russian workers the *limitations* of the general strike compared with the armed uprising. Luxemburg, on the other hand, wanted to show German workers the vistas offered by the general strike tactic *compared* with the dull routine that surrounded and limited accepted practice in Germany. So there was a different approach stemming from national conditions. Between 1905 and 1907 Russia experienced a tremendous revolutionary convulsion; Germany only the slow decay of social peace.

However, though she was intimately associated with Russian politics - and was an off-on ally of the Bolsheviks - her account fails to fully appreciate the crucial role of the party and political consciousness. This was not the result of what Gramsci unfairly called her "iron economic determinism".[52] Rather it was Luxemburg's tendency to produce universal theories based on only partial - ie, one-sided - truths. Thus on the national question Luxemburg came out in opposition to self-determination as a principle because of her correct view that the workers of Russia and her native Poland had no interest in fighting for separation (the main portion of a dismembered Poland, Kingdom Poland, was at that time part of the tsarist empire). In the same way, having adopted Germany and the German workers' movement, she hardened her theoretical over-reliance on the revolutionary spontaneity of the masses. Given her earlier opposition to Lenin's "ultra"-centralism, this was true to form.[53]

After all, when directly involved in Russian politics, Luxemburg was a leading member of the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, which, though an affiliate of the RSDLP, amounted to little more than a confessional sect. With the full support of Luxemburg, Leo Jogiches ran the organisation as a labour dictator and maintained an aloof, a hostile, a sectarian, attitude towards the mass-membership Polish Socialist Party and the 1906 mass-membership PSP-Left split (despite the latter's break with Polish nationalism). Confessional sects, including sects of one, tend, to say the least, to rely on spontaneity to bring about the revolution. Mass movement, not mass organisation, is therefore their priority.

Luxemburg's belief that "the directing organs of the socialist party ... play a conservative role" and that revolution is primarily "a spontaneous act" - laughably theorised against Lenin in 1904 - was confirmed to her by later personal experience of the social democratic apparatus in Germany.[54] She was sure it would act as a *barrier* to revolution. So the spontaneous movement of the future was not to be taken over, directed, controlled, by the party, but freed from its "barbed wire".[55]

She was right about the social democratic apparatus in Germany. But without an alternative, communist apparatus - ie, organisation and central coordination - the spontaneous movement, though it can begin by sweeping up millions into joyous acts of rebellion, inevitability exhausts itself, fragments along sectional lines or becomes the mere plaything of this or that faction of the ruling class ●

Notes

1. C Power *Lysistrata: the ritual logic of the sex-strike* - radicalanthropologygroup.org/sites/default/files/pdf/pub_lysistrata.pdf.
2. F Engels *MECW* Vol 26, Moscow 1990, p165.
3. R David *The pyramid builders of ancient Egypt: a modern investigation of pharaoh's workforce* London 2003, p74.
4. See GEM de Ste Croix *The class struggle in the ancient world* London 1983, p562.
5. See R MacMillan, 'A note on Roman strikes' *The Classical Journal* March 1963.
6. EP Thompson *Customs in common* London 1991, p42.
7. The home territory of Athens is Attica, a diminutive 800-square-mile jut of land, which at its greatest breadth is just 25 miles wide - meaning that even the most distant peasant-citizen farmer could get to the assembly, or the court, with less than a day's walk.
8. K Marx and F Engels *The German ideology* London 1989, p83.
9. EP Thompson *The making of the English working class* Harmondsworth 1981, p11.
10. K Marx and F Engels *MECW* Vol 20, Moscow 1984, p144.
11. By 1833 the Owenite movement was actively canvassing an "alliance between the trade unionists of England, France and Germany" (EP Thompson *The making of the English working class* Harmondsworth 1981, p912).
12. K Marx and F Engels *MECW* Vol 44, New York 1989, p258.
13. *Ibid*.
14. Robert Owen had prepared the ground for this with his disdain for political action. But, as Edward Thompson explains, after 1832 there was a "swing to general unionism". The years that followed were rich with proposals to use strike action for political ends: the Grand National Holiday in the industrial districts canvassed by Benbow; the lectures of John Francis Bray; the Society for National Regeneration, with its remedy of the general strike for the eight-hour day (EP Thompson *The making of the English working class* Harmondsworth 1981, p910).
15. F Engels *The condition of the working class* in *England* Harmondsworth 1972, p257.
16. The Corn Laws were first introduced in 1804 by a parliament dominated by landed interests. War with France perpetuated conditions whereby the most parasitic elements could hang on to governing power and push through legislation that ran counter to the 'rational' interests of the bourgeois nation. Though big landlords maintained their enormous and bloated wealth by the levying of a protective duty on corn imports, for the mass of the population that meant a high price for bread, and for the industrial capitalists an upward pressure on the price of labour-power. A combination of Anti-Corn Law League agitation and the famine in Ireland was eventually responsible for their final repeal in June 1846.
17. The industrial bourgeoisie secured full *voting* entry into the parliamentary political system with the Reform Act of 1832. Edward Thompson suggests that this resolved a revolutionary situation in Britain and hence prevented an explosion that would have undoubtedly gone way beyond the Jacobin Year II of France. Maybe even putting political power into the hands of a British version of the *enragés* (EP Thompson *The poverty of theory* London 1981, pp257-66). Though *real* capitalism was now the dominant mode of production, even at this decisive *reformist* moment the industrial bourgeoisie failed to constitute itself as an independent, let alone dominant, political force in parliament. Except for the handful of Radicals the industrial bourgeoisie lined up behind the Whig Party (a prefiguration of the *reformist* entry of working class voters onto the political scene less than half a century later). Capital exercised power not through a bourgeois political class, but socially as a dominant mode of production. The landed aristocracy - which had through capitalist farming and charging capitalist ground rent on mines become bourgeoisified - continued to staff the governing caste throughout the 19th century. Between 1818 and 1900 there was no discernible increase in the number of commoners in British cabinets. Indeed before Edward Heath most Tory leaders boasted long aristocratic pedigrees.
18. M Jenkins *The general strike of 1842* London 1980, p21.
19. *Ibid* p23.
20. Quoted in M Jenkins *The general strike of 1842* London 1980, p15.
21. See D Thompson *The Chartists* Aldershot 1986, pp271-98.
22. F Engels *The condition of the working class in England* Harmondsworth 1972, p259.
23. Mikhail Bakunin (1814-76) - a Russian anarchist and still one of its leading ideologists. He took part in the February 1848 revolution in Paris, was imprisoned in Saxony in 1849 and was handed over to the tsarist authorities, who sent him into exile in Siberia. He escaped in 1861. As a member of the First International, from 1864 he waged an underhand factional struggle against its general council led by Marx.
24. RM Cutler (ed) *The basic Bakunin: writings 1869-71* Amherst NY 1992, pp149-50.
25. K Marx and F Engels *MECW* Vol 23, Moscow 1988, p584.
26. theanarchistlibrary.org/library/anarcho-1905.
27. K Marx and F Engels *MECW* Vol 23, London 1988, p543.
28. www.marxists.org/subject/mayday/articles/tracht.html.
29. Bakunin and other anarchists were expelled from the First International at its Hague congress in 1872. A similar fate befell them at the Second International's 1896 congress in London.
30. R Rocker, 'The political struggle: anarcho-syndicalist view' - www.marxists.org/reference/archive/rocker-rudolf/misc/anarchism-anarcho-syndicalism.htm.
31. See G Sorel *Reflections on violence* Cambridge 1999.
32. See G Sorel *The decomposition of Marxism* London 1961.
33. M Macnair, 'The anarchist origins of the "general strike" slogan' *Weekly Worker* March 17 2011: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/857/anarchist-origins-of-the-general-strike-slogan.
34. Quoted in D Gaido, 'Marxism and the union bureaucracy: Karl Kautsky on Samuel Gompers and the German Free Trade Unions' - philarchive.org/archive/GAIABA.
35. Before February 1 1918 the Julian calendar, which is 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar, was in use in Russia. Therefore January *9* in the Russia of 1905 corresponds to January *22* according to the calendar we use.
36. Quoted in Neil Harding (ed) *Marxism in Russia* Cambridge 1983, p312.
37. Exact figures are impossible because the tsarist authorities did their best to suppress them. The dead were secretly buried. Certainly though, the number of dead ran into the hundreds; the number of wounded into the thousands.
38. L Trotsky *1905* Harmondsworth 1973, p93. At the time Trotsky was more than prone to sing praise songs to spontaneity - after all, he never led anything more, in RSDLP terms, than a centrist mish-mash.
39. *Ibid* p98.
40. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 10, Moscow 1977, p155.
41. On the eve of the revolution, in January 1905, the Bolsheviks counted no more than 8,400 members. By the spring of 1906, however, membership of the reunited Russian Social Democratic Labour Party stood at 48,000, of whom 34,000 were Bolsheviks and 14,000 Mensheviks. In the October of that year membership exceeded 70,000 and in 1907 the figures given at the London congress show that there were 84,000 members (that did not include the Bund, and the Polish and Lettish sections). The Bolsheviks were still the largest faction with 46,000 members, compared to the Mensheviks' 38,000. (Figures quoted in M Liebman *Leninism under Lenin* London 1980, p47).
42. Quoted in G Zinoviev *History of the Bolshevik Party* London 1973, p123.
43. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 8, Moscow 1977, pp98-99.
44. Trotsky, writing before he became a Bolshevik, admits that the "indecision" in the capital could be explained "by the fact that the Petersburg workers realised very clearly that this time it was not a matter of a strike or demonstration, but a life-or-death struggle" (L Trotsky *1905* Harmondsworth 1973, p249).
45. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 10, Moscow 1977, p152.
46. In 1882 Marx and Engels had declared that "Today ... Russia forms the vanguard of revolutionary action in Europe" (F Engels 'preface to 1882 edition' *Manifesto of the Communist Party* Moscow 1953, p14).
47. James Connolly was particularly impressed by the Moscow barricade tactics. Writing in May 1915, he wrote how it was "wise" that, unlike the French revolutionaries of an earlier time, the Russians did not "man the barricades", but used surprise tactics, attacking *only* when the enemy was in "range of their inferior weapons" (J Connolly *Selected Writings* London 1988, p226).
48. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 11, Moscow 1977, p214.
49. *Ibid* Vol 10, pp152-53.
50. Quoted in G Zinoviev *History of the Bolshevik Party* London 1973, p127.
51. In February 1906 the SDP's central committee secretly agreed with the trade union leaders *not* to implement the Jena resolution. Despite that in the following years the Second International, in which the German party played a vanguard role, passed a number of resolutions which threatened the use of any means - and everyone knew that also meant a general strike - in the event of an inter-imperialist war (see J Riddle *Lenin's struggle for a revolutionary International* New York 1984, pp23, 25, 33-37).
52. A Gramsci *Prison notebooks* London 1973, p233.
53. R Luxemburg *Selected political writings* New York 1972, pp93-105.
54. *Ibid* pp102-03.
55. www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1904/questions-rsd/ch01.htm.