

Nature and Function of the Proletarian Party

Gauche Communiste de France
1947

Written in French in October 1948 for *Internationalisme* 38. This version is based on a translation, with introduction and footnotes, that the ICC published in *International Review* 153, which can be found on the ICC website at <https://en.internationalism.org/internationalreview/2014/10329/sep-tember/international-review-2nd-semester-2014>.

ICC Introduction

The document we are publishing below first appeared in 1947 in the pages of *Internationalisme*, the press of the small group “Gauche Communiste de France” (Communist Left of France), to which (amongst others) the ICC has traced its origins since its foundation in 1975. It was reprinted at the beginning of the 1970s in the *Bulletin d'études et de discussion* published by the French group “Révolution Internationale”, later to become the section in France of the newly formed International Communist Current. The *Bulletin* was itself the precursor of the ICC's theoretical organ, the *International Review*, and its aim was to give the young group – and its very young militants – a more solid anchorage, through theoretical reflection and a better knowledge of the workers' movement, including the history of the movement's confrontation with new theoretical questions posed by history¹.

The text's main object is to examine the historical conditions which determine the formation and the activity of revolutionary organisations. The very idea of such determination is fundamental. Although the creation and survival of a revolutionary organisation is the fruit of a militant will, aiming to be an active factor in history, the form that this will takes does not come out of the blue, independently of social reality and independently above all of the consciousness and fighting spirit present in the broad masses of the working class. The conception that the creation of a class party depended only on the “will” of the militants has been characteristic of Trotskyism since the 1930s, but also – at the end of World War II – of the newly formed “Partito Comunista Internazionale”, the precursor of the various Bordigist groups and of today's International Communist

¹ Today we share all the key ideas presented in this text and in most cases can support them to the letter. This is especially true for its insistence on the fundamental and irreplaceable role of the political party of the proletariat for the victory of the revolution. However, the following expression in the text does not provide the best way of understanding the dynamic of the development of the class struggle and the relations between party and class: “Left to their own internal development, the workers' struggles against the conditions of capitalist exploitation can lead at most to the explosion of revolts”. In fact, historical experience has shown the revolutionary capacities of the class, in particular the fact that the combination of the economic with the political dimensions of the struggle can mutually dynamise each other. To be more precise about the role of revolutionaries, it is not to bring consciousness to the workers but to accelerate, to extend and deepen, the development of consciousness within the class. For more elements relating to our position on this subject, we refer readers to the following articles: “The mass strike opens the door to the proletarian revolution”, *International Review* 90 (part of the series on communism), and “Questions of organisation: have we become ‘Leninists’?” in *IR* 96 and 97.

Tendency (ex-IBRP). *Internationalisme's* article insists, rightly in our view, that we have here two fundamentally different conceptions of political organisation: the one, voluntarist and idealist; the other, materialist and marxist. At best, the voluntarist conception could only engender congenital opportunism – as was the case for the PCInt and its descendants; at worst, as with the Trotskyists, it led to conciliation with the bourgeoisie and going over to the enemy camp.

For the young post-68 generation, the importance of historical and theoretical reflection on this issue is obvious. It was to preserve the ICC (though it did not immunise us, far from it) from the worst effects of the frenzied activism and impatience which were typical of this period, and were to lead so many groups and militants to abandon political activity.

We are deeply convinced that this text remains wholly relevant to this day for a new generation of militants, and especially in its insistence that the working class is not just a sociological category, but a class with a specific role to play in history: to overthrow capitalism and build a communist society². The role of revolutionaries is equally dependent on the historical period: when the situation of the working class means that it is impossible to influence the course of events, the role of revolutionaries is not to ignore reality and pretend that their immediate intervention can change things, but to get down to an apparently much less spectacular task: preparing the theoretical and political conditions for an intervention which will be determinant for the class struggle of the future.

Introduction

Our group has taken on the task of re-examining the major problems posed by the need to re-constitute a new revolutionary workers' movement. It has had to consider the evolution of capitalist society towards state capitalism, and of the old workers' movement which for some time has served to support the capitalist class and help drag the proletariat behind the latter; it has also had to look at what, in this old workers' movement, provided material which the capitalist class could use to this end, and how. Then we have been led to reconsider what, within the workers' movement, remains given and what has become outdated since the *Communist Manifesto*.

Finally, it was quite normal for us to have studied the problems posed by the revolution and socialism. It was with this in mind that we presented a study on the state after the revolution³, and that we are now presenting for discussion a study of the problem of the revolutionary party of the proletariat. We should remember that this is one of the most important questions in the revolutionary workers' movement. This question opposed Marx and the marxists to the anarchists, to certain social democratic tendencies and, finally to the revolutionary syndicalist tendencies. It was at the centre of Marx's concerns, and he always retained a critical attitude towards the different organisms which called themselves 'workers' or 'socialist' parties, Internationals and so on. Marx, although at given moments he participated actively in the life of certain of these organs, always saw them as political groups within which, following the expression of the *Communist Manifesto*, communists could express themselves as the "vanguard of the proletariat". The goal of the communists was to push forward the activity of these organisations while maintaining the capacity for autonomous criticism and activity. Then came the split within the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party between the Menshevik tendency and the Bolsheviks around the ideas developed by Lenin in *What is to be done? Amongst*

² The same theoretical reflection underlies another article, "The tasks of the hour", published in *Internationalisme* in 1946 and re-published in *IR* 32.

³ Republished, with a new introduction, under the title "In the aftermath of World War II..." (see recommended links)

the marxist groups which had broken from Social-Democracy to form the Communist International, the same problem was at the basis of the opposition between the council communists and the KAPD, and the Third International. It was also in this order of thinking that you have the divergence between the Bordiga group and Lenin around the subject of the 'United Front' advocated by Lenin and Trotsky and adopted by the Communist International. The same problem remains one of the major disagreements among the different oppositional groups: between 'Trotskyists' and 'Bordigists', and indeed it was a subject of discussion among all the groups of the time.

Today, we must critically re-examine all these expressions of the revolutionary workers' movement. We hope to draw out of this process – i.e. in the expression of different currents of thought on this question – a current which, in our view, will best express the revolutionary standpoint, and thus try to pose the problem for the future revolutionary workers' movement.

We also need to reconsider critically the points of view which have been brought to bear on this problem, to determine what remains constant in the revolutionary expression of the proletariat, but also what has become obsolete and what new problems have been posed.

It is evident that such work can only bear fruit if it is the object of discussion between and within the groups that aim to reconstitute a new revolutionary workers' movement.

The study presented here is thus a means to participate in this discussion; it has no other pretension, even though it is presented in the form of theses. Its goal is above all to stimulate discussion and criticism and not to provide definitive solutions. It is a work of research which aims less at acceptance or rejection pure and simple than at stimulating other works of this kind.

The essential focus of this study is the expression of revolutionary consciousness in the proletariat. But there are a number of programmatic questions related to the party which are only touched on here; organisational problems, problems of the relationship between the party and organisms like the workers' councils, problems relating to the attitude of revolutionaries faced with the formation of several groups claiming to be THE revolutionary party and trying to build it, the problems posed by the pre- and post-revolutionary tasks, etc.

Therefore militants who understand that the task of the hour is to examine these various problems should intervene actively in this discussion, either through their own papers or bulletins, or in this bulletin, for those who for the time being don't have such a possibility of expressing themselves.

Internationalisme

Socialism and consciousness

1: The idea of the necessity for a political organism acting inside the proletariat for the social revolution seemed to be a given in the socialist workers' movement.

It is true that the anarchists have always protested against the term "political" which is given to this organism. But this anarchist protest comes from the fact that they understand the term political action in a very narrow sense, since it is synonymous for them with action for legislative reforms: participation in elections and bourgeois parliaments, etc. But neither the anarchists nor any other current in the workers' movement deny the necessity for the regroupment of revolutionary socialists in associations which, through action and propaganda, take on the task of intervening in and orienting workers' struggles. And any grouping which gives itself the task of orientating social struggles in a certain direction is a political regroupment.

In this sense, the struggle of ideas around the political or non-political character given to these organisations is only a debate about words, hiding at root, under general phrases, concrete divergences on the orientation and on the aims and the means to achieve them. In other words, precise political divergences.

If new tendencies are emerging today that call into question the necessity for a political organisation of the proletariat, this is a consequence of the degeneration of the parties which were once organisations of the proletariat and of their passage into the service of capitalism: the Socialist and Communist parties. Political terms and political parties are today suffering from discredit, even within the bourgeois milieu. However, what has led to these resounding weaknesses is not politics but SPECIFIC KINDS of politics. Politics is nothing other than the orientation that men adopt in the organisation of social life; to turn away from this action means renouncing any determination to give a direction to social life and, consequently, to transform it. It means accepting and submitting to society as it stands.

2: The idea of class is essentially historico-political, not merely an economic classification. Economically, all humans are part of one and the same system of production in a given historical period. The division based upon the distinct positions that men occupy in the same system of production and distribution, and which doesn't go beyond the framework of this system, cannot become the basis of the historic necessity for overcoming it. Division into economic categories is thus only a moment in the constant internal contradictions that develop with the system but remain circumscribed by its own limitations. Historic opposition is, so to speak, external, in the sense that it is opposed to all of the system taken as a whole, and this opposition is manifested in the destruction of the existing social system and its replacement by another based on a new mode of production. Class is the personification of this historic opposition at the same time as being the social-human force for its realisation.

The proletariat exists as a class in the full sense of the term only in the orientation that it gives to its struggles, not with a view to improving its conditions of life within the capitalist system but in its opposition to the existing social order. The passage from category to class, from the economic struggle to the political, is not an evolutionary process, a continual and inherent development, so that a historic class opposition emerges automatically and naturally after being contained for a long time in the economic position of the workers. There is a dialectical leap one to the other. It consists in the coming to consciousness of the historical necessity for the disappearance of the capitalist system. This historic necessity coincides with the aspiration of the proletariat for liberation from its condition of exploitation and is contained within it.

3: All social transformations in history have, as a fundamentally determining condition, the fact that the development of the productive forces has become incompatible with the restricted structures of the old society. Capitalism's demise, and the reason for its collapse, lies in its inability to dominate any longer the productive forces that it has developed. This is also the historic justification of its transcendence by socialism.

Apart from this condition, however, the differences between previous revolutions (including the bourgeois revolution) and the socialist revolution remain decisive and demand a profound study on the part of the revolutionary class.

For the bourgeois revolution for example, the condition for the development of productive forces incompatible with those of feudalism still lay within a system based on the property of a possessing class. As a result, capitalism developed its economic foundation slowly and over a long period inside the feudal world. The political revolution followed the economic fact and consecrated it. Also as a result, the bourgeoisie has no imperious necessity to acquire an awareness of economic and social movement. Its

actions are directly propelled by the pressures of the laws of economic development which act upon it as blind forces of nature and determine its will. Its consciousness remains a secondary factor. It comes after the fact. It records events rather than giving direction to them. The bourgeois revolution is situated in this prehistory of humanity where the still undeveloped productive forces dominate man.

Socialism, on the contrary, is based upon the development of productive forces which are incompatible with all individual or social property of a class. From this, socialism cannot be based upon the economic foundations within capitalist society. The political revolution is the condition of a socialist orientation of the economy and of society. And from this, socialism can only be realised through the consciousness of the movement's final goals, the consciousness of the means for realising them and the conscious will for action. Socialist consciousness **precedes and conditions** revolutionary class action. The socialist revolution is the beginning of history where man is called upon to dominate the productive forces which have already been strongly developed, and this domination is precisely the purpose adopted by the socialist revolution.

4: For this reason, all attempts to establish socialism on realisations achieved within capitalist society are by their very nature destined to fail. Socialism demands, in terms of time, an advanced development of the productive forces, and in terms of space, the entire earth: its precondition is the conscious will of men. In the best of cases, the experimental demonstration of socialism within capitalist society cannot go beyond the level of a utopia. And persisting along this route leads to a position of conservation and the strengthening of capitalism⁴. Socialism within a capitalist regime can only be a theoretical demonstration, its materialisation can only take the form of an ideological force, and its realisation can only take place by the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat against the existing social order.

And since the existence of socialism can only find expression first of all in socialist consciousness, the class which bears it and personifies it has a historic existence only through this consciousness. The formation of the proletariat as a historic class is nothing other than the formation of its socialist consciousness. These are the two aspects of the same historic process, inconceivable separately because one cannot exist without the other.

Socialist consciousness does not flow from the economic position of the workers, it is not a reflection of their condition as wage-earners. For this reason, socialist consciousness is not simply and spontaneously formed in the head of every worker, or in the heads of workers alone. Socialism as an ideology appears separately from and in parallel with the economic struggles of the workers. They do not engender each other although they influence each other, and the development of each conditions that of the other; both are rooted in the historic development of capitalist society.

The formation of the class party in history

5: If the workers only become "a class in itself and for itself" (according to the expression of Marx and Engels) through socialist consciousness, one can say that the process of the constitution of the class is identified with the process of the formation of groups of revolutionary socialist militants. The party of the proletariat is not a selection or a "delegation" of the class, it is the mode of existence and life of the class itself. No more than one can understand matter apart from its movement, one cannot understand the class apart from its tendency to constitute itself into political organisms: "*The organisation of the proletariat*"

⁴ This is what happened to all the currents of utopian socialism which, having become schools, lost their revolutionary aspect and were transformed into actively conservative forces. Consider the examples of Proudhonism, Fourierism, the co-operatives, reformism and state socialism.

into a class and thus into a political party (*Communist Manifesto*) is no chance formula, but expresses the profound thought of Marx and Engels. A century of experience has masterfully confirmed the validity of this way of seeing the notion of class.

6: Socialist consciousness is not **produced** by spontaneous generation but is constantly **reproduced**; once it has appeared it becomes, in its opposition to the existing capitalist world, the active principle determining and accelerating its own development in and through action. However this development is conditioned and limited by the development of the contradictions of capitalism. In this sense, Lenin's thesis of 'socialist consciousness injected into the workers by the Party' is certainly more precise than Rosa's thesis of the 'spontaneity' of the development of consciousness, engendered during the course of a movement that starts with the economic struggle and culminates in a revolutionary socialist struggle. The thesis of 'spontaneity', despite its democratic appearances, reveals at root a mechanistic tendency, a rigorous economic determinism. It is based on a cause and effect relationship, with consciousness as merely an effect, the result of an initial movement, i.e., the economic struggle of the workers which gives rise to it. In this view, consciousness is seen as fundamentally passive in relation to the economic struggles which are the active factor. Lenin's conception restores to socialist consciousness and the party which materialises it the character of an essentially active factor and principle. It does not detach itself from life and the movement but is included within it.

7: The fundamental difficulty of the socialist revolution lies in this complex and contradictory situation: on the one hand the revolution can only be made through the **conscious** action of the **great majority** of the working class; on the other hand the development of this consciousness comes up against the conditions to which all workers in capitalist society are subjected, and which endlessly hinder and destroy the workers' consciousness of their revolutionary historic mission. This difficulty can absolutely not be overcome solely through theoretical propaganda independent of the historic conjuncture. But still less than through pure propaganda will the solution be found in the economic struggles of the workers. Left to their own internal development, the workers' struggles against the conditions of capitalist exploitation can lead at most to the explosion of revolts, in other words negative reactions which are absolutely insufficient for the positive action of social transformation; the latter is made possible only through a consciousness of the aims of the movement. This factor can only be this political element of the class which draws its theoretical substance, not from the contingencies and particularities of the economic position of the workers, but from the unfolding of historic possibilities and necessities. Only the intervention of this factor will make it possible for the class to rise from the level of purely negative reaction to that of positive action, from revolt to revolution.

8: But it would be entirely wrong to want to substitute these organisms, which are expressions of the consciousness and existence of the class, for the class itself and to consider the class as merely a shapeless mass destined to serve as material for these political organisms. That would be to substitute a militarist conception for a revolutionary one in relations between being and consciousness and between the party and the class. The historic function of the party is not to be a General Staff leading the action of a class which is seen as an army ignorant both of the final aim and the immediate objective of operations. That would be to see its movement as a sum total of manoeuvres.

The socialist revolution is not at all comparable to military action. Its realisation is conditioned by the workers' consciousness that dictates their decisions and actions.

The party does not, then, act in place of the class. It does not demand "confidence" in the bourgeois sense of the word, in other words to have delegated to it the fate and

destiny of society. Its sole historic function is to act with a view to allowing the class itself to acquire the consciousness of its mission, of its aims and of the means which are the foundations of its revolutionary action.

9: Just as we must combat this conception of the party as General Staff, acting on behalf of the working class, we must with equal vigour reject the other conception which, on the basis that “*the emancipation of the workers is the work of the workers themselves*” (Inaugural Address of the First International) denies any role to the militant and the revolutionary party. Under the very praiseworthy pretext of not imposing their will on the workers, these militants shirk their tasks, run from their responsibility and leave revolutionaries tailing the workers’ movement.

The former puts itself outside the class by denying it and substituting for it, the latter similarly puts itself outside the class by denying the specific function of the class organisation, i.e., the party, by denying their own existence as a factor of revolution and excluding themselves by forbidding themselves any action of their own.

10: A correct understanding of the conditions of the socialist revolution must start from and embody the following elements:

a. Socialism is a necessity only because the development reached by the productive forces is no longer compatible with a society divided into classes.

b. This necessity can only become a reality through the will and conscious action of the oppressed class whose social liberation is tied up with the liberation of humanity from its alienation from the forces of production, to which it has hitherto been subjected.

c. Socialism, being both an objective necessity and a subjective will, can only be expressed in revolutionary **action** that is conscious of its aims.

d. Revolutionary action is inconceivable without a revolutionary programme. Similarly, the elaboration of the programme is inseparable from action. It is because the revolutionary party is a “*body of doctrine and a will to action*” (Bordiga) that it is the most thorough concretisation of socialist consciousness and the fundamental element for its realisation.

11: The tendency towards the constitution of the party of the proletariat appears right from the birth of capitalist society. But as long as the historic conditions for socialism are not sufficiently developed, the ideology of the proletariat regarding the construction of the party can only remain at an embryonic stage. It is only with the “Communist League” that this accomplished form of the political organisation of the proletariat appears for the first time.

When one looks closely at the development of the formation of class parties, it is immediately obvious that the organisation into parties does not follow a constant progression, but on the contrary happens in periods of major development, alternating with others during which the party disappears. Thus the organic existence of the party does not appear to depend solely on the will of the individuals who compose it. Objective conditions determine its existence. The party, being essentially an instrument of revolutionary class action, can only exist in situations where the action of the class comes to the surface. In the absence of the conditions for workers’ class action (such as in periods of the economic and political stability of capitalism or following decisive defeats of the workers’ struggles) the party cannot continue to exist. Organically it breaks up or else if it wants to exist, in other words to continue to exercise an influence, then it must adapt to the new conditions which deny revolutionary action; inevitably, the party takes on a new content. It becomes conformist, that is to say it ceases to be a party of the revolution.

Marx understood the conditions of the existence of the party better than most. Twice he undertook the dissolution of a great organisation: first in 1851, following the defeat of the revolution and the triumph of the reaction in Europe, and secondly in 1873 after the defeat of the Paris Commune, he was quite openly for the dissolution of the party. The first time it was the Communist League, and the second, the First International.

The task of the hour for revolutionary militants

12: The experience of the Second International confirms the impossibility of maintaining the party of the proletariat during a prolonged period marked by a non-revolutionary situation. The participation of the parties of the Second International in the imperialist war of 1914 only revealed the long corruption of the organisation. The permeability and penetrability of the political organisation of the proletariat to the ideology of the reigning capitalist class, which is always possible, can in long periods of stagnation and reflux of the class struggle assume such an extent that the ideology of the bourgeoisie ends up substituting itself for that of the proletariat, so that inevitably the party is emptied of all its original class content and becomes instead an instrument of the enemy class.

The history of the Communist Parties of the Third International has again shown the impossibility of safeguarding the party in a period of revolutionary reflux and its inevitable degeneration during such a period.

13: For these reasons, the formation of parties, such as the Trotskyist International from 1935, or more recently the Internationalist Communist Party in Italy, is not merely artificial: these can only be enterprises of confusion and opportunism. Instead of being moments in the constitution of the future class party, these formations are obstacles and discredit it by the caricature that they present. Far from expressing a maturation of consciousness and an advance on the old programme that they have transformed into dogmas, they only reproduce the old programme and are imprisoned by these dogmas. Nothing surprising about the fact that these formations take up out of date and backward positions of the old party and worsen them still further, as with the tactics of parliamentarism, trade unionism, etc.

14: But the break in the party's organisational existence does not mean a break in the development of class ideology. In the first place the revolutionary reflux signifies the immaturity of the revolutionary programme. Defeat is a signal for the necessity to critically re-examine previous programmatic positions and the obligation to go beyond them on the basis of the living experience of the struggle.

This positive critical work of programmatic elaboration is pursued through the organisms coming from the old party. They constitute, in the period of retreat, the active element for the constitution of the future party in a new period of revolutionary upsurge. These organisms are the left groups or fractions coming out of the party after its organisational dissolution or its ideological alienation. Such were: the fraction of Marx in the period between the dissolution of the League and the formation of the First International, the left currents in the Second International (during the First World War) which gave birth to the new Parties and International in 1919; also the Left Fractions and groups who continued their revolutionary work following the degeneration of the Third International. Their existence and their development is the condition which has enriched the programme of the revolution and the reconstruction of the party of tomorrow.

15: The old party, once it has passed into the service of the enemy class, definitively ceases being a milieu in which revolutionary thought can be elaborated and in which militants of the proletariat can be formed. Expecting currents coming from social democracy or Stalinism to serve as material for the construction of a new class party thus means ignoring the very foundation of the idea of the party. The Trotskyists' adherence to the

parties of the Second International, or their pursuit of the hypocritical practice of burrowing within these parties with the idea of cultivating, inside this anti-proletarian milieu, "revolutionary" currents with whom they could set up the new party of the proletariat, merely demonstrates that they themselves are a dead current, an expression of the past movement and not that of the future.

Just as the new party of the revolution cannot be set up on the basis of a programme which has been overtaken by events, neither can it be built with elements who remain organically attached to organisms which have forever ceased to be working class.

16: The history of the workers' movement has never known a period which is more sombre and more marked by such a profound retreat in revolutionary consciousness than the present. If the economic exploitation of the workers appears as an absolutely insufficient condition for assuming a consciousness of their historic mission, it turns out that the development of this consciousness is infinitely more difficult than revolutionary militants had previously thought. Perhaps, for the proletariat to recover, humanity will have to undergo the nightmare of a Third World War with the horror of a world in chaos, and the proletariat will have to face a very tangible dilemma: die or save yourself by revolution before it can find the conditions for recovering both itself and its consciousness.

17: It is not for us here in the framework of this thesis to look for the precise conditions that will allow the re-emergence of proletarian consciousness, nor what will be the conditions for the formation of the unitary organisation that the proletariat will adopt for its revolutionary combat. What we can say categorically, based on the experience of the last thirty years, is that neither economic demands, nor the whole range of so-called "democratic" demands (parliament, rights of peoples to self-determination, etc...) can be of use to the historic action of the proletariat. Concerning forms of organisation, it appears as still more evident that it cannot be the unions with their vertical and professional, corporatist structures. All these forms of organisation belong to a past workers' movement and will have to be relegated to the museum of history. But they will have to be abandoned and overtaken in practice. The new organisations will have to be unitary, that is to say inclusive of the great majority of the workers, and go beyond the particular divisions of professional interests. Their basis will be on the social level, their structure the locality. Workers' councils, like those that appeared in 1917 in Russia and 1918 in Germany, were a new type of unitary organisation of the class. It is in these types of workers' councils, and not in the rejuvenation of the unions, that the workers will find the most appropriate form of their organisation.

But whatever the new unitary forms of organisation of the class it changes nothing regarding the problem of the necessity for the political organism which is the party, nor regarding the decisive role that it has to play. The party remains the conscious factor in the action of the class. It is the ideologically vital motor force of the proletariat's revolutionary action. In social action it plays a role similar to that of energy in production. The reconstruction of this organism of the class is conditioned by the appearance of a tendency within the class to break with capitalist ideology as it engages in practice in the struggle against the existing regime, while at the same time this reconstruction is a condition for the acceleration and deepening of this struggle and the decisive condition for its triumph.

18: The absence of the conditions required for the construction of the party should not lead to the conclusion that any immediate activity by revolutionary militants is useless or impossible. The militant has not to choose between the hollow "activism" of the party builders and individual isolation, between adventurism and an impotent pessimism: both must be fought, as being equally foreign to the revolutionary spirit and harmful to the cause of the revolution. We must reject both the voluntarist idea of militant action

presented as the sole factor determining the movement of the class, and the mechanical conception of the party as a mere passive reflection of the movement. Militants must consider their action as one of the factors which, in interaction with others, conditions and determines the action of the class. This conception provides the foundation for the necessity and value of the militant's activity, while at the same time setting the limits of its possibilities and impact. Adapting one's activity to the conditions of the present conjuncture is the only means of making this activity efficient and fruitful.

19: The attempt to construct the new class party in all haste and at any cost, despite unfavourable objective conditions springs from both an infantile and adventurist voluntarism and a false appreciation of the situation and its immediate perspectives, as well as, moreover, a totally wrong appreciation of the idea of the party and the relationship between party and class. Thus all such attempts are fatally destined to fail and only manage, in the best of cases, to create opportunist groupings trailing in the wake of the big parties of the Second and Third Internationals. Their existence is henceforth justified solely by the development within them of the spirit of the chapel and the sect.

Thus all these organisations are not only caught up, in their positivity, in the cogs of opportunism through their immediate "activism", they also, in their negativity, produce a narrow spirit typical of the sect, a parochial patriotism, as well as a fearful and superstitious attachment to "leaders", a caricature of the bigger organisations, a deification of organisational rules and submission to a "freely consented" discipline that becomes all the more tyrannical and intolerable in inverse proportion to the numbers involved in them.

In this dual outcome, the artificial and premature construction of the party leads to the negation of the construction of the political organism of the class, to the destruction of cadres and the more or less rapid, but still inevitable, loss of militants, used up, exhausted, in the void, and completely demoralised.

20: The disappearance of the party, either through its contraction and its organisational dislocation as was the case in the First International, or, through its passage into the service of capitalism, as was the case for the parties of the Second and Third Internationals, expresses in both cases the end of a period of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat. The disappearance of the party is thus inevitable and neither voluntarism nor the presence of a more or less brilliant leader is able to prevent it.

Marx and Engels twice saw the organisation of the proletariat, in whose life they both played a major part, break up and die. Lenin and Luxemburg looked on powerlessly at the betrayal of the great parties of social democracy. Trotsky and Bordiga could do nothing to alter the degeneration of the Communist parties and their transformation into the monstrous capitalist machines that we have been faced with ever since.

These examples tell us not that the party is futile, as a fatalist and superficial analysis would have it, but only that the necessary party of the class has no existence along a uniformly continuous and rising line, that its very existence is not always possible, that its existence and development are in correspondence with and closely linked to the class struggle of the proletariat which gives birth to it and which it expresses. That's why the struggle of revolutionary militants within the party during the course of its degeneration and before its death as a workers' party has a revolutionary meaning, but not the vulgar meaning given to it by various Trotskyist oppositions. For the latter, it is a matter of setting the party right, and to this end it is above all necessary that the organisation and its unity is not put in peril. For them it is a question of maintaining the organisation in its past splendour, when in fact this is impossible precisely because of the objective conditions, so that the organisation's original splendour could only be maintained at the price of a constant and growing alteration of its revolutionary and class nature. They look to organisational measures and remedies in order to save the organisation without understanding

that organisational collapse is always the reflection of a period of revolutionary reflux and is often a far better solution than its survival; and in any case what revolutionaries have to save is not the organisation but its class ideology which is at risk of going down with the organisation.

Without understanding the objective causes of the inevitable loss of the old party, one cannot understand the task of militants in this period. Some came to the conclusion that, because they had failed to preserve the old party of the class, it was necessary to construct a new one straight away. This incomprehension can only result in adventurism, the whole being based on a voluntarist conception of the party.

A correct study of reality makes clear that the death of the old party clearly implies the immediate impossibility of constructing a new one; it means that the necessary conditions for the existence of any party, old or new, do not exist in the present.

In such a period only small revolutionary groups can survive, assuring a continuity which is less organisational than ideological. These groups concentrate within themselves the past experience of the class struggle, providing a link between the party of yesterday and that of tomorrow, between the culminating point of the struggle and the maturation of class consciousness in a period of past upsurge and its re-emergence on a higher level in a new period of upsurge in the future. In these groups the ideological life of the class carries on through the self-criticism of its struggles, the critical re-examination of its past ideas, the elaboration of its programme, the maturation of its consciousness and the formation of new cadres, new militants for the next stage of the revolutionary assault.

21: The present period that we are living in is on the one hand the product of the defeat of the first great revolutionary wave of the international proletariat which put an end to the First World War and which reached its high point in the October 1917 revolution in Russia and in the Spartacist movement of 1918-19 and, on the other, of the profound transformation that has taken place in the politico-economic structure of capitalism, which has been evolving towards its ultimate and decadent form: state capitalism. What is more, a dialectical relationship exists between this evolution of capitalism and the defeat of the revolution.

Despite their heroic fighting spirit, despite the permanent and insurmountable crisis of the capitalist system and the unprecedented aggravation of the conditions of the working class, the proletariat and its vanguard have not been able to hold out against the counter-offensive of capitalism. They were not confronted with classic capitalism and were surprised by its transformations, which have posed problems for which they were unprepared, either theoretically or politically. The proletariat and its vanguard, which had for a long time generally identified capitalism with private property of the means of production and socialism with statification, were baffled and disorientated by modern capitalism's tendencies towards the statified concentration of the economy and planning. The great majority of workers were left with the idea that this evolution presented a new transformation of society from capitalism towards socialism. They associated themselves with this idea, abandoned their historic mission and became the most staunch partisans of the conservation of capitalist society.

It is these historic reasons that give the proletariat its present physiognomy. As long as these conditions prevail, as long as state capitalist ideology dominates the heads of workers, there can be no question of the reconstruction of the class party. Only through the course of the bloody cataclysms which mark out the phase of state capitalism will the proletariat grasp the abyss which separates socialist liberation from the present monstrous state capitalist regime, only thus will it develop a growing capacity to detach itself from this ideology which currently imprisons and annihilates it. Only then will the way

again be opened for “*the organisation of the proletariat into a class and thus into a political party*”. This stage will be reached all the more quickly if its revolutionary nuclei have made the theoretical effort needed to respond to the new problems posed by state capitalism and to help the proletariat recover its class solution and the means for its realisation.

22: In the present period, revolutionary militants can only survive by forming small groups undertaking a patient work of propaganda, of necessity limited in scope, at the same time as making strenuous efforts of research and theoretical clarification.

These groups will only be able to fulfil their tasks through looking for contact with other groups on the national and international levels on the basis of criteria demarcated by class frontiers. Only such contacts and their multiplication, with the aim of confronting positions and the clarification of problems, can allow these groups and militants to physically and politically resist the terrible pressure of capitalism in the present period and allow all these efforts to be a real contribution to the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat.

The party of tomorrow

23: The party will not be a simple reproduction of that of yesterday. It cannot be rebuilt on an old model drawn from the past. As well as its programme, its structure and the relations it has established between itself and the whole of the class are founded on a synthesis of past experience and the new, more advanced conditions of the present stage. The party follows the evolution of the class struggle and at each stage of the latter's history corresponds to a particular form of the political organism of the proletariat.

At the dawn of modern capitalism, in the first half of the 19th century, a working class still in its phase of constitution undertook local and sporadic struggles and could only give birth to doctrinal schools, sects and leagues. The Communist League was the most advanced expression of this period, while at the same time its *Manifesto* with its call “proletarians of all countries – unite” heralded the period to come.

The First International corresponded to the proletariat's effective entry onto the stage of social and political struggle in the principal countries of Europe. It thus grouped together all the organised forces of the working class, its diverse ideological tendencies. The First International brought together both all the currents and all the contingent aspects of the workers' struggles: economic, educational, political and theoretical. It was the highest point of the working class' **unitary organisation** in all its diversity.

The Second International marked a stage of differentiation between the economic struggle of wage labour and the social, political struggle. In this period of the full flourishing of capitalist society, the Second International was the organisation of the struggle for reforms and of political conquests, for the political affirmation of the proletariat, and at the same time it marked a higher stage in the ideological demarcation of the proletariat by clarifying and elaborating the theoretical foundations of its historic revolutionary mission.

The First World War revealed the historic crisis of capitalism and opened up the period of its decline. The socialist revolution evolved from the theoretical level to one of practical demonstration. In the heat of events the proletariat in some ways found itself forced to hastily construct its revolutionary organisation of combat. The immense programmatic contribution of the first years of the Third International nonetheless proved inadequate faced with the huge problems posed by this ultimate phase of capitalism and by the tasks of revolutionary transformation. At the same time, living experience quickly demonstrated the general ideological immaturity of the class as a whole. Faced with these two dangers and under the pressure of events, piled on in rapid succession, the

Third International was left to respond through organisational measures: iron discipline of militants, etc.

The organisational aspect had to compensate for the inadequacy of the programme, and the party for the immaturity of the class. As a result, the party ended up substituting itself for the action of the class itself, with a resulting alteration of the idea of the party and its relations with the class.

24: On the basis of this experience, the future party will be founded on the re-establishment of this truth: although the revolution contains a problem of organisation, it is not however a problem of organisation. Above all, the revolution is an ideological problem of the maturation of consciousness among the broad masses of the proletariat.

No organisation, no party can substitute for the class itself and it remains true more than ever that *“the emancipation of the workers will be the task of the workers themselves”*. The party, which is the crystallisation of class consciousness, is neither different from nor synonymous with the class. The party necessarily remains a small minority; it has no ambition to be a great numerical force. At no moment can it separate from nor replace the living action of the class. Its function remains that of ideological inspiration within the movement and action of the class.

25: During the insurrectionary period of the revolution, the role of the party is not to demand power for itself, nor to call on the masses to “have confidence” in it. It intervenes and develops its activity in favour of the self-mobilisation of the class, within which it aims for the triumph of its principles and the means for revolutionary action.

The mobilisation of the class around the party to which it “entrusts” or rather abandons leadership is a conception reflecting a state of immaturity in the class. Experience has shown that in such conditions the revolution will find it impossible to triumph and will degenerate quickly, resulting in a divorce between the class and the party. The latter finds itself forced to resort to more and more coercive methods in order to impose itself on the class, and this ends up as a serious obstacle to the forward march of the revolution.

The party is not an organisation of direction and execution; these functions belong to the unitary organisation of the class. If militants of the party take part in these functions they do so as members of the greater community of the proletariat.

26: In the post-revolutionary period, the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the party is not the Single Party that is the classic hallmark of totalitarian regimes. The latter are characterised by their identification and assimilation with the state power of which they hold the monopoly. On the contrary, the class party of the proletariat characterises itself by being distinguished from the state, which is its historic antithesis. The Totalitarian Single Party tends to bloat and incorporate millions of individuals, making this a physical element of its domination and oppression. The party of the proletariat, on the contrary, by its nature, remains a strict ideological selection whose militants have no advantages to gain or defend. Their privilege is only to be the clearest combatants and the most devoted to the revolutionary cause. Thus the party doesn't aim to incorporate large numbers, because as its ideology becomes that of greater masses, the necessity for its existence tends to disappear and the hour of its dissolution will begin to sound.

The internal regime of the Party

27: The problem of the organisational rules which constitute the internal regime of the party is just as decisive as that of its programmatic content. Past experience, and most particularly that of the parties of the Third International, has shown that the conception of the party makes up a unitary whole. Organisational rules are an aspect and an

expression of this conception. The question of organisation is not separate from the idea that one has of the party's role and function and of its relationship with the class. None of these questions exist in themselves, rather they make up elements that are constitutive and expressive of the whole.

The parties of the Third International had the rules or the internal regimes they had because they were set up in a period of evident immaturity of the class which led to the substitution of party for class, organisation for consciousness, discipline for conviction.

The organisational rules of the future party will thus have to be based on a very different conception of the role of the party in a much more advanced stage of the struggle, resting on a much greater ideological maturity of the class.

28: The questions of democratic or organic centralism which occupied a major place in the Third International have lost their sharpness for the future party. When the action of the class relies on the action of the party, the question of the maximum practical efficacy came to dominate the party which, moreover, could only provide partial solutions.

The effectiveness of the party's action does not consist in its practical action of leadership and execution, but in its ideological action. Thus the strength of the party lies not in the submission of its militants to discipline, but in their knowledge, their greater ideological development and their solid conviction.

The rules of the organisation do not come from abstract notions raised to the level of immanent or immutable principles, democratic or centralist. Such principles are empty of meaning. If the settlement of decisions taken by the (democratic) majority has to be maintained in the absence of a more appropriate method, that doesn't in any way mean that by definition the majority has the monopoly on truth and correct positions. Correct positions flow from the greatest knowledge of the object, from the closest grip on reality.

Thus the organisation's internal rules must correspond to its objectives and so to the role of the party. Whatever the importance of the efficiency of its practical immediate action, which can provide it with the basis for exercising a wider discipline, it still remains less important than the maximum flourishing of the thinking of its militants, and as a consequence is subordinate to it.

As long as the party remains the crucible where class ideology is elaborated and deepened, its guiding principle must not only be the greatest freedom of ideas and disagreement in the framework of its programmatic principles: an even more fundamental concern must be to ceaselessly maintain and facilitate the combustion of thought, by providing the means for discussion and the confrontation of ideas and of tendencies inside the organisation.

29: Looking at the conception of the party from this angle, nothing is more foreign to it than the monstrous idea of a homogeneous, monolithic and monopolist party.

The existence of tendencies and fractions within the party is not just something to be tolerated, a right to be accorded and thus subject to discussion.

On the contrary, the existence of currents in the party – in the framework of acquired and verified principles – is one of the manifestations of a healthy conception of the idea of the party.

Marco. June 1948.