

# The Crisis in Socialist Theory

BY Dr. ANTON PANNEKOEK

*The "Group of International Communists" In Holland*

The first world war and the ensuing Russian and German revolutions raised new problems and brought about profound changes in the ideas of workers and Socialists. The German Socialist Party, the apparently powerful organisation ready to conquer political dominance and thereby to establish Socialism, when in power turned out a means for re-establishing capitalism. In Russia the workers had beaten down Czarism and taken possession of the factories and the land; now State Capitalism brought them into stricter slavery under a new master class. And not reformism only was to be blamed; the most notable spokesman of uncompromising radicalism, renowned as Marxists, such as Kautsky and Lenin, were agents in this development. Clearly there must be something wrong in the current doctrine.

The current doctrine was that the workers by ballot elect a Parliament and determine a Government of Socialists; then these politicians and officials have to do the essential work of expropriating the capitalists, of abolishing private ownership of the means of production, and of organising production. The ensuing system of public ownership, where the workers are wage-earners in service of the State, is entirely different from common ownership, where the workers are direct masters of the enterprises and regulate their work themselves. In the latter case the problem arises of how these enterprises can be combined into a well-planned social organisation. In fervent discussions, intense spiritual activity, the different leftist groups that had split off from the Socialist and the Communist Parties, tried to discover what other ways of action should lead the working class to the goal of freedom.

Political refugees to Holland who had taken part in the fight of the German workers, 1920-21 in the Ruhr rebellion and in that of the Saxonian plants, had experienced what a wealth of initiative and capacities sprang up in the masses when they stood before the task of organising themselves, their life and their fight. In Holland, owing to its situation in the midst of English, French, and German influences, fundamental theoretical understanding had penetrated into rather broad groups of workers and intellectuals. Out of their collaboration a group of militants, calling themselves "Group of International Communists" (G.I.C.), came forward and set themselves to the study of the economic basis of the new society. They knew quite well that the workers' revolution would not bring at once, as by miracle, a world of abundance where everybody had only to take

according to his wishes. The new socialist order has to be built up in hard fight and deliberate work, by means of a well-devised organisation, according to strict rules of proletarian equity. Every form of society has its solid material basis in an economic system, a mode of production and distribution, that determines its structure and character. Already before but still more after the war many authors had occupied themselves with this economic problem (Kautsky, Hilferding, Neurath, Leichter, Max Weber, Cole, etc.), but they had all assumed as its base that a central leading power is necessary, a government that imposes its regulations upon the separate units of production. Anarchist writers, surely, had proclaimed the autonomy of the separate shops; but there the connection into a social organisation was left to goodwill only.

The G.I.C. in studying the problem, the main problem of Socialism, of how to combine freedom with organisation, perceived that they had only to continue along the lines of thought laid down by Marx in occasional small notes, in the *Capital* and in his remarks on the Gotha programme of the German S.D. Marx did not speak therein of State-socialism, which he opposed strongly, but of "the association of free and equal producers," directing their work themselves; he pointed out that instead of value and money the "average time of production," measured in hours of work, will form the basis of the new economic system. These ideas which the "Marxist" writers had entirely abandoned, were now worked out by the G.I.C. authors in an important booklet: *Principles of Communist Production and Distribution* that in 1930 appeared in German and in Dutch. There it is shown that by the book-keeping of every enterprise, completed by registering and book-keeping of the processes of social production, on the basis of the hours spent, the workers are able themselves to supervise and direct production and distribution. Bodies of delegates, "workers' councils" are the instruments in organising the separate enterprises into a social entirety. It is shown that this is not, simply a possible and better form than State-directed Socialism, but that it is the only possible form. It is not possible for a central bureaucracy of officials and experts to ascertain all needs, prescribe all the work and supervise all the processes in their details; all the proposed systems lead to arbitrariness in distribution by a ruling minority. Self-rule of the free and equal producers, on the one hand, is able to regulate production and distribution without difficulty, the rules and dealings being imposed by economic realities. The difficulties arise by interposing a State-power between production and consumption. Thus the aspirations of self-determination arising in the workers, from mere sentiment and political programme were turned into the embodiment of an economic necessity. Thus a scientific foundation was laid for the task of self-liberation of the working class.

It is to be regretted that this book was not accessible to English workers (the bulk of the German edition moreover was destroyed with the ascendancy of Nazism), because its practical basis could appeal strongly to the practical English mind. Now that Capitalism

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# Five Theses

We reprint the following THESES ON THE FIGHT OF WORKING CLASS AGAINST CAPITALISM, as first printed in issue of May, 1947, under present title, from Dr. Anton Pannekoek, Holland. THESE THESES EXPOUND THE VIEWS of the "Group of International Communists" in Holland.

But applicable to ALL capitalist countries; advocate a positive role for the workers.

And of vital importance to the Australian working class.

The Theses are as follow:—

## I.

*Capitalism in one century of growth has enormously increased its power, not only through expansion over the entire earth, but also through development into new forms. With it the working class has increased in power, in numbers, in massal concentration, in organisation. Its fight against capitalist exploitation, for mastery over the means of production, also is continually developing and has to develop into new forms.*

The development of capitalism led to the concentration of power over the chief branches of production in the hands of big monopolistic concerns. They are intimately connected with State Power, and dominate it, they control the main part of the press, they direct public opinion. Middle-class democracy has proved the best camouflage of this political dominance of big capital. At the same time there is a growing tendency in most countries to use the organised power of the State in concentrating the management of the key industries in its hands, as a beginning of planned economy. In Germany many a State-directed economy united political leadership and capitalist management into one combined exploiting class. In Russia State-capitalism the bureaucracy is collectively master over the means of production, and by dictatorial government keeps the exploited masses in submission.

## II.

*Socialism, put up as the goal of the workers' fight, is the organisation of production by Government. It means State-socialism, the command of the State-officials over production and the command of managers, scientists, shop-officials in the shop. In socialist economy this body, forming a well-organised bureaucracy, is the direct master over the process of production. It has the disposal over the total product, determining what part shall be assigned as wages to the workers, and takes the rest for general needs and for itself. The workers under democracy may choose their masters, but they are not*

grows into an international power; and fighting conditions tend to be more equalised over the world, the workers in every country should look for more international exchange of experiences and ideas.

For the time being this study gave a strong impulse to the propaganda of the little group. In its statement of principles the G.I.C. rejected party politics and union leadership, and put up the workers' councils as the form of organisation of self-rule. It called upon the workers to take up the fight for communist production, to take into their own hands the direction and administration of production and distribution according to general rules, and thus to realise the association of free and equal producers.

The G.I.C. did not constitute itself as a new party trying to get adherents; it put up the principle that in all practical action of real fight the workers have to act—and will act—as one solid unity, against which the differences between the groups and parties and unions are futile. Besides several pamphlets it brought out regularly "press materials" put at the disposal of all groups who should wish to publish it, in which current events were treated from this new point of view. Thus, in friendly discussion with other leftist groups, strongly and fundamentally opposing the Socialists in power and the Communist Parties, it disseminated its ideas. In an irregularly appearing *Raete-korrespondenz* (Council correspondence) theoretical questions were treated. In 1938 it published in German, *Lenin als Philosoph* (Lenin as a Philosopher), wherein it is shown that Lenin, in his basic philosophical ideas, stands over against Marxism: by lack of financial means it could only be issued in a limited number of cyclostyled copies. After the war the G.I.C. combined with the group *Spartacus* that to a great extent had gone in the same direction; that had a broader membership, but in the underground fight against the Germans had lost its most prominent spokesmen. Together they publish now the weekly *Spartacus*, the only weekly paper that makes uncompromising class fight of the working class for freedom and mastery of production the basis and contents of all its propaganda. A book on *De Arbeiterstrawern* (The Workers' Councils), expounding these views (which also exists in an English version in manuscript) was published by them last year.—The above appeared in *Left*, London, October, 1947.

The book mentioned above, *Lenin as a Philosopher*, is now in process of being printed in U.S.A. by Paul Mattick.

The book *The Workers' Councils*, is to be printed in English by ourselves in Australia, and issued in monthly parts as a supplement to *Southern Advocate for Workers' Councils*, so soon in 1948 as the manuscript comes to us from Holland. Dr. Anton Pannekoek told us he was posting it by sea mail last month. (See last issue, No. 39.—Editorial.)

Extra copies will be printed on the best better book paper that may be available, and will be put aside to be bound in permanent book form when the whole book is completed.