

Ulli Diemer
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**Beyond Trade Unionism
&
Vanguardism**



**ORGANIZING
FOR
WORKERS' POWER**

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**Lotta Continua
Italy**

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G.K.

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Introduction

ORGANIZING FOR WORKERS' POWER—IN CANADA

[These introductory remarks reflect an ongoing discussion among a number of militants in southern Ontario.]

Left militants in Canada share the common view that the development of a strategy for revolution specific to Canada involves two closely related tasks: the concrete analysis of the conditions of class struggle in Canada today, as conditioned by the historical development of the class struggle both nationally and internationally; and the analysis of the lessons to be drawn from the practical and theoretical experiences of the class struggle throughout the world.

Among the points of reference outside Canada which have been important for militants here are Marx, Lenin and Mao, to mention only these three. The importance of their contribution to the development of revolutionary theory and strategy is attributable in significant part to their association with great practical struggles of exceptional importance to the whole history of the international proletarian movement: Marx, with the first phase of mass struggle of the European proletariat, culminating in the Paris Commune; Lenin, with the revolutionary process in Russia from the late 1890's until the victory of the October Revolution; and Mao, with the revolutionary experience of the Chinese people since the 1920's. As indispensable contributions to a general revolutionary perspective, these struggles, and the theory that developed within them, remain of permanent relevance today.

At the same time, it is impossible to forget the very quality of rootedness in specific conditions of class struggle which characterized these revolutionaries' reflections on strategy. Their theoretical and practical work was not carried on in the specific conditions of class struggle in advanced capitalist society. While drawing on their contributions to a general revolutionary perspective, militants in the advanced capitalist countries have to develop a strategy for revolution from analysis of the class struggle in advanced capitalism, of which May '68 in France and Italy since the late 1960's are only the most obvious examples. The theoretical perspectives for revolution in the advanced capitalist societies are being forged within these struggles, and it is essential that militants in different countries share these experiences and political perspectives. This is the spirit in which the following document is presented to left militants in Canada.

This document deals with the problem of revolutionary leadership and organization, and the forms they take in different stages in the development of the proletarian struggle. This fundamental problem of the relationship between "vanguard and masses" requires clear theoretical and practical perspectives from the moment a group of militants decides to intervene in the class struggle-- whether the form of that intervention be as a "Marxist-Leninist" vanguard formation or as a locally-based collective.

The document reflects a political debate in 1968 within the Italian political group Potere Operaio ("Workers' Power") in Pisa. "Workers' Power" was one of the new revolutionary groups which developed through interventions in plant and other workers' struggles in Italy during the early and mid-1960's, as well as in the mass student struggles in 1967-68. This document thus reflects not a theoretical discussion, but an exchange between militants on the basis of their collective practice. It indicates how one group of the new revolutionary left in Italy viewed its role at a specific stage in the development of the proletarian struggle in Italy-- a stage, it should be noted, which preceded the wave of spontaneous workers' struggles from 1968 on. The rapid development of these mass struggles created new conditions in the class struggle and correspondingly new political tasks, to whose clarification the author of this document has contributed as a member of Lotta Continua, a political organization whose form, as a fusion of militants from within the mass struggles of workers and students, is a practical expression of the author's hypotheses in this 1968 document.

The specific conditions of struggle in Canada in the early 1970's are not strictly comparable to those in Italy in early 1968; and still less can we anticipate the rapid development of spontaneous mass struggle that occurred in Italy after 1968. But for left militants in Canada who are presently developing a working class perspective and practice, the debate in "Workers' Power" in 1968 can contribute in a general way to clarifying how to define the political relationship of left militants to the class struggle in a period preceding the development of mass, autonomous struggles in Canada.

To begin, it is important to briefly outline the broadly Leninist approach to the problem with which both "Workers' Power" and left militants in Canada have had to come to grips.*

* Two of Lenin's writings in particular have shaped the western left's trade union-vanguard party perspective: What is to be Done? (1902) and Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder (1920). This Leninist approach is concisely stated in: P. Anderson, "The Limits and Possibilities of Trade Union Action", in The Incompatibles: Trade Union Militancy and the Consensus, ed. R. Blackburn & A. Cockburn, London, 1967, pp. 263-279.

The Leninist approach begins from the premise that the class struggle and the development of consciousness are objectively divided into "economic" and "political" spheres, to which correspond the organizational forms of the trade union and vanguard party. In this view, workers' struggles are inherently "economic", limited to fighting against individual bosses for better wages and working conditions within the capitalist system; as such, they can develop only a limited form of class consciousness. Trade unions are seen as the organized expression of this "objective" limitation of workers' struggles. Thus the limited class consciousness developed through "economic" struggles in trade unions has to be broadened to a "political", "revolutionary" consciousness, which is defined essentially as the consciousness of the necessity of the whole working class to struggle against the bourgeois state, the organized power of the whole capitalist class. The vanguard party, as the bearer of this "revolutionary" consciousness, is seen as the organized expression of this "objective" need to bring "revolutionary" consciousness and organization to workers' struggles and thereby broaden them into a proletarian struggle to destroy bourgeois state power, the necessary pre-condition to building socialism. According to this conception of the class struggle, revolutionary consciousness and leadership cannot develop "spontaneously" within the mass struggle, but has to "come to" the mass struggle "from the outside-- from an external vanguard party. The vanguard party, as the bearer of revolutionary consciousness and the locus of revolutionary leadership and organization for the whole working class, is thus external to the mass struggle.

These general assumptions are the basis for the role assigned to left militants in the trade unions by the Leninist strategic perspective. Trade unions are affirmed as the correct organizational form for the development of mass struggles; the task of left militants is to bring to these mass struggles the consciousness of the necessity of socialist revolution as the only real solution to workers' general condition under capitalism, and to assert the necessity of building the "political" organization of the working class, the Party, as the only means of achieving this solution. The role of the trade union and vanguard party are thus self-reinforcing: by consciously containing and developing workers' struggles within the trade union and trade union forms of consciousness, the Leninist perspective makes "necessary" the existence of an external vanguard party as the bearer of revolutionary consciousness and the locus of political leadership.

These broad assumptions about the nature of the class struggle under capitalism and the strategic and organizational approach derived from them have been challenged by the mass struggles of important sections of the European working class since the late 1960's. This has caused many groups and militants to put into question the classic trade union-vanguard party approach as a strategy for proletarian revolution in the advanced capitalist countries.

Already in the early and mid-1960's, small groups of left militants in Europe were developing a fundamental critique of the classic Leninist strategy and model of organization, which was seen to be at the heart of the bureaucratic degeneration of socialism in the Soviet Union and the adoption of a fundamentally reformist line by the large Communist Parties in Europe.* These small groups posed the necessity of developing the consciousness, leadership, and organization of the working class in such a way that the working class itself could make the revolution, and not the Party on behalf of the working class. At the same time, the limitations of trade unions as organizations for developing the proletarian struggle, consciousness, and leadership appeared even more obvious in the 1960's than in Lenin's time: since the 1930's, the trade union as an institution (and not just the bureaucratic apparatus and leadership) had been definitively transformed into institutions of the capitalist state for containing the class struggle within a bourgeois framework. Discussions on the organizational alternative to the trade union-vanguard party approach through which proletarian consciousness, leadership and organization could develop centred on the tradition of workers' councils, although it was still unclear how this alternative could be developed immediately as a perspective for practical intervention in workers' struggles.

Then the mass struggles of workers and students in the late 1960's provided the practical basis for clarifying the new strategic perspective: these mass struggles "spontaneously" developed new forms of mass organizations (base committees) autonomous of both the trade unions and vanguard parties, and "spontaneously" developed proletarian consciousness and leadership.** The theoretical and practical elements of a strategic alternative to the trade union-vanguard party approach were now present.

* One of the most significant of these small groups of militants was gathered around the journal Quaderni Rossi ("Red Notebooks") in Turin, Italy. Several of the most important new revolutionary groups in Italy today (including Lotta Continua, Potere Operaio, Il Manifesto) owe much to the theoretical and practical work of the Quaderni Rossi militants. A remarkable record of its work, and an anthology of articles from the journal, are available in: Luttes ouvrières et capitalisme d'aujourd'hui, Paris, Maspero, 1968.

** A direct reflection of some of these struggles is available in the pamphlet: For Canadian Workers: Lessons from Italy, a selection of interviews, speeches and articles by workers and left militants involved in these struggles. Distributed from the addresses listed at the end of this pamphlet.

This strategic alternative has come to be expressed in the concepts of workers' autonomy and mass vanguard. "Workers' autonomy" refers both to the forms of organization and the immediate anti-capitalist, proletarian content of workers' struggles through which the proletarian movement develops. On the one hand, it means the direct control of workplace struggles by rank-and-file workers through autonomous mass organizations such as base committees, without the control of the trade union or vanguard parties. On the other hand, it means the progressive tendency, clearly evidenced in workers' struggles in Europe, for rank-and-file controlled and organized struggles to focus on class objectives. These class objectives have been focussed on capitalist relations of production as expressed in the capitalist organization of production. For example, struggles have developed against the capitalist division of labour in the production process as a class device for maintaining bourgeois class domination (e.g. the role of foremen) and as a class device for dividing workers against each other in competing job classifications; struggles have also attacked the capitalist linking of wages to productivity rather than to human need. "Workers' autonomy" thus refers to the reality that workers' struggles can and must develop a directly anti-capitalist, class autonomy, in terms of both organization and consciousness.

The development of workers' autonomy thus allows proletarian consciousness, leadership and organization to develop within the mass struggle as the basis for a radically new type of revolutionary leadership and organization-- the mass vanguard, understood as the political unification (political line, strategic coherence, co-ordination, centralization) of the autonomous struggles of different sections of the working class.

What does this new perspective on revolutionary organization in the advanced capitalist countries mean in Canada today-- in a period preceding the mass emergence of organized forms of workers' autonomy in the struggles of Canadian workers? This is the interest of the political debate in "Workers' Power" in 1968, which also took place before mass, autonomous struggles developed in Italy. The author of the document presented here seeks to define the "vanguard" status of "Workers' Power" in relation to the concepts of workers' autonomy and mass vanguard. The question is not whether an "external" vanguard-- understood as a form of political leadership and initiative which has not emerged from within mass struggles-- is necessary: "Workers' Power" was in fact an "external" vanguard, because "external" interventions in workers' struggles were necessary to liberate the class militancy of the rank-and-file from the inherently class-integrating mechanisms of the trade unions. But this circumstantial necessity did not justify the conclusion that the "external" vanguard was a permanent necessity in principle.

The "external" vanguard should not aspire to organizational permanence; it should not set itself up as the bearer of the "science of the working class", bringing the "correct line" and the "clear perspective" to the masses. Rather, it should see itself as an open, provisional

form of organization and political leadership. It should see itself not as a political group whose aim is to recruit and indoctrinate "advanced" workers and left militants as the basis for developing the group into "the Party", but rather as a political group which works towards its own abolition as an "external" vanguard and its replacement by a mass internal vanguard, whose emergence and self-organization it contributes to by promoting workers' autonomy in workplace struggles and on other fronts of the mass struggle.

At a further stage in the development of the mass struggle, when the spread of mass internal vanguards at the local and regional level has created the conditions and the practical necessity for political unification, it will then be possible to develop an entirely new type of revolutionary leadership and organization. In these conditions, such an organization would be the unified political expression of the struggles of different sections of the working class.

The refusal of "Workers' Power" to found a new revolutionary party did not imply that revolutionary leadership and organization are unnecessary. Rather, it meant that it was not up to the "external" vanguard to be this leadership and organization. The really new type of mass leadership and revolutionary organization that is required to carry through a proletarian revolution in advanced capitalist society can only emerge through the development of workers' autonomy.

For left militants in Canada, the concepts of workers' autonomy and mass vanguard are a concrete and necessary alternative to the traditional trade union-vanguard party approach. In the last few years, many militants in Canada have emphasized one or the other side of the trade union-vanguard party approach without always being fully conscious of their inter-relatedness. On the one hand, there are militants organized into what they define formally as Marxist-Leninist formations who want to avoid the reformism (Communist Party; Trotskyist League for Socialist Action) or exaggerated external vanguardism (e.g. Communist Party of Canada- M-L) of the established Marxist-Leninist organizations. But reformism and exaggerated vanguardism are not simply subjective errors; they have an objective basis-- the impossibility of developing a mass, proletarian revolution in advanced capitalist society through Leninist assumptions about the nature of the class struggle and the corresponding trade union-vanguard party forms of organization.

On the other hand, there are left militants who have become involved in trade union struggles, convinced that this is a more correct way of relating to workers' struggles than through external vanguard groups. For some, this has meant working towards the democratization of the unions so the rank-and-file can have more control over the union. For others, it has meant building a Canadian-based trade union movement, both by organizing non-unionized workers into Canadian unions and by encouraging break-aways from the "international" unions. While the objective of winning more control for Canadian workers over the trade unions is important, it is not in itself a strategy for building a

revolutionary workers' movement. The problem of developing proletarian consciousness, leadership and organization cannot be handled by the trade union form of organization. In order to avoid the trade union-vanguard party "solution" to this problem, left militants engaged in trade union work must have an eye to maximizing the elements of workers' autonomy which are present within trade union struggles towards the objective of going beyond trade unionism.

Only a dialectical break with both sides of the trade union-vanguard party approach as a perspective for proletarian revolution will enable left militants to avoid reproducing the historic errors (reformism and exaggerated external vanguardism) for which their current orientations are meant to be the corrective. This is not to say there is a ready-made, uniform approach (e.g. base committees) to developing workers' autonomy which can be "applied" to the struggles of all sectors of the working class in Canada. The organizational forms and the immediate objectives of struggle through which workers' autonomy can be allowed to develop can be discovered only by the concrete investigation of the conditions and pattern of struggle among different sectors of the working class (e.g. unionized mass production workers; non-unionized production workers; office workers, public service workers, new strata such as teachers and technicians, etc.)

The central factor in the development of the new revolutionary workers' movement in Europe has been the emergence of the theory and practice of workers' autonomy. The document presented here was one of the first theoretical expressions of this factor. It can serve as a significant stimulus for left militants in Canada to clarify their relationship to mass struggles in the early 1970's.

A. Sofri

ORGANIZING FOR WORKERS' POWER

Why has the problem of the party -- understood not simply as the need for organization, but as the need for a general political leadership -- not to this point been the subject of systematic discussion among us? In the past, the problem of the party was posed only in terms of the numerical growth of subjectively "revolutionary" groups. We have clearly rejected this approach; instead, we have opted for direct and ongoing involvement with the reality of class struggle. This was a correct and important option on our part, which has already provided some elements for fruitful discussion.

We reject two types of conception of the party: the first, according to which the consciousness of the necessity of the party, of an organized political leadership, is sufficient to create the conditions for the development of the party; the second, which sees revolutionary political leadership, the party, as the linear continuation of a past revolutionary tradition (be it Marxism, Marxism-Leninism, Marxism-Leninism-Maoism) which has been at different times in the past corrupted and regenerated -- in this conception, revolutionary strategy is always seen as the "return" to the "correct" revolutionary tradition.

For us, the correctness of revolutionary leadership, strategy and revolutionary organization derives neither from past revolutionary experience nor from the consciousness that the party is necessary. Their correctness derives, in the final analysis, from their relationship to the masses, and their capacity to be the conscious and general expression of the revolutionary needs of the oppressed masses....

Does this mean that revolutionary leadership develops "spontaneously" from the masses, and that it coincides with the development

of the struggle of the masses itself? Does it mean we can simply wipe out the distinction between vanguard and masses, and conclude they should be one and the same thing? The answer is no. But it is precisely here, in the definition of the concept we have of "vanguard", that lies the heart of the problem.

For Lenin, revolutionary consciousness is produced by the encounter between the "economic" struggle of the working class (which, in Lenin's view, was inherently trade unionist, thus always within the capitalist system) and Marxist intellectuals who have broken with their bourgeois class origins and allied themselves with the interests of the working class. Consciousness thus "comes to" the working class "from the outside". And it is the party, the organization of revolutionaries equipped with the tools of Marxist analysis, which embodies the revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat.

In passing, we shouldn't forget the point correctly made by the anti-Leninist tradition: the "bureaucratic degeneration" which is inherent in the Leninist conception of the relationship between the party and the masses. At the same time, we should never forget that the history of the Bolshevik party is the history of decades of heroic, tenacious, systematic struggle to develop links with the working class and the oppressed masses of Tsarist Russia. The Bolsheviks' confidence in the masses, and their capacity to link themselves to the masses in circumstances which made the struggle infinitely cruel, can never be denied by anyone who really wants to understand the victory of the October Revolution.

But the Leninist definition cannot provide us today with a solution to the problems we have to confront in advanced capitalist society. The Leninist definition of "spontaneous" workers' struggles as inherently trade unionist and "economist" leads to the posing of the question of revolutionaries' relationship to the working class in terms of ideological "conquest" and of "the injecting from the outside" of "political" consciousness. The spontaneous struggle of

workers cannot be seen as simply specific, local, trade unionist struggles of workers in this plant against their bosses in this plant: on the contrary, spontaneous rank and file struggles have attained a high level of political contestation of capitalist rationality. This is very clear in the great workers' struggles in recent years in the advanced capitalist countries (France, May '68; Italy, since 1968...). It is impossible to reduce these struggles to simply "economist" demands -- as the unions have discovered -- and it's no coincidence that the unions are now trying to put the brakes on these struggles and co-opt them into the trade union framework. All this should justify neither a metaphysic of workers' self-organization, nor the reduction of class consciousness to the consciousness of relations of production in the plant. But we have to recognize that consciousness is not "outside" the masses.

At the same time, we can no longer accept the validity, in advanced capitalist society, of Lenin's definition of intellectuals ("the cultured representatives of the dominant classes"): this definition cannot accurately fit the profound transformation in the class composition of advanced capitalist societies, as the student movement demonstrated so clearly (unless we want to continue to define the majority of students as "bourgeois intellectuals" who make the revolution by rejecting their own class). It is true that "without revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary movement" (Lenin), but it is true in a new sense: revolutionary theory doesn't "penetrate" mass movements from the outside, but develops within mass struggles, as the systematic knowledge of the needs of the masses and as their generalization, in an incessant dialectical process.

Anyone who wants to examine seriously the historical experience of the Leninist model has to come to grips with how the Leninist concept of the vanguard, while it was carried by Lenin and the Bolsheviks with an extraordinary revolutionary tension, later justified the most thoroughgoing arbitrariness in the relationship between the party and the masses. The problem is certainly not located in the absence of an

"institutional", "statutory" control of the masses over the party, but in the type of mass-party relationship inherent in the Leninist conception itself.

The Leninist conception poses the problem of the mass-party relationship in the following terms: workers' struggles (inherently "economic"); "economic" organization of workers (trade union); party (external "revolutionary" consciousness) works within the trade unions (the "transmission belt" for injecting revolutionary consciousness) and thereby controls (or "represents") the working class. This conception is totally foreign to us.

The only correct perspective for handling the mass-vanguard relationship starts with the politicization and organization of the masses in order to arrive at the development and unification of a mass vanguard. It's not just a question of a subjective necessity for democracy at the base, but of an objective necessity: revolution in the advanced capitalist countries is not made possible or necessary by the economic collapse of capitalism, but by the ripening of the political confrontation between capital and the proletariat. This implies changing from the perspective of insurrection to the perspective of protracted (eventually armed) struggle, even in the advanced capitalist countries....

May '68 in France is a good illustration. Rarely have such idiotic interpretations been heard. They fall into two categories: the first, which correctly emphasizes the spontaneous and political character of the workers' explosion, draws lessons which justify spontaneist positions (rejection of organisational work and rejection of the need for political leadership); the second, which correctly notes the incapacity of the struggle to move towards the seizure of power, draws the lesson that the absence of a revolutionary party is the key factor. The first interpretation has been proven incorrect by events themselves. The second, interesting because it's more typical, suggests that to "seize power", it would have been enough to simply lead one of the mass workers' demonstrations to the president's palace. In this view, the party is seen as

an external leadership, operating according to a logic autonomous of the mass struggle, which, in a context of acute social crisis, places itself "at the head" of a spontaneous movement and points the way to the seizure of power. Conclusion: the mass movement exists, but it has no head; let's build the party and attach it to the "body" of the masses.

Our position has been different. The problem in France was not the seizure of power, but power. The problem of bourgeois power was raised by very significant, spontaneous mass vanguards (the student movement, particular sections of the working class -- workers in the mass production industries and certain more technically qualified strata such as technicians), and not by an external leadership. At the same time, the spontaneous, proletarian struggle of May '68 discovered in its lack of unification and in its own lack of organization the insurmountable limitations of its political and practical force. In this phase of the struggle, then, the tasks of revolutionaries are the organization and linking up of these mass vanguards, the extension and development of autonomous mass organizations at the base (e.g., in the plants and other work places, in the schools, etc.), and the bringing together, from the different fronts of struggle, of a revolutionary political leadership to guide and unify the struggle. This is the only way that general political leadership can mature, and a generalized class confrontation can lead to a situation of dual power and the destruction of the bourgeois state. The problem for revolutionaries is not to "place yourself" at the head of the masses, but to be the head of the masses.

I want to submit a new concept for discussion which has a quite concrete importance for our experience as militants in "Workers' Power" (in the period preceding the outbreak of mass spontaneous workers' struggles in Italy): the concept of external vanguard. "Workers' Power" is the product of the subjective initiative of a certain number of individuals who, having agreed upon a certain political orientation, decided, on this basis, to do ongoing liaison, formation and organizational work with workers and others.

Then isn't "Workers' Power" an "external" vanguard? In fact, in many instances, yes; but in principle, the answer is no, precisely because we do not see ourselves as the embryo-- however tiny-- of the party, but rather as a group of militants whose objective is to accelerate the conditions necessary for the development of the mass revolutionary organization-- a group of militants at the service of the development of forms of consciousness, struggle, and autonomous organization.

The history of our political work-- a history with plenty of detours, because of our own subjective shortcomings as well as of what only our experience could have taught us-- is rich in lessons, but this isn't the time to go over it. However, there is one central point which would be useful to recall. At a certain point in the development of our work, reflection on forms of base organizations ("base committees") became collective and assumed a decisive importance in our work. But the problem of "workers' councils" posed itself to us in a new way, as the extension of the work carried on by militants in "Workers' Power" and as the result of our analysis of a certain number of fundamental experiences: the student movement, the May Movement in France, workers' struggles in Italy and, in a broader framework, the Cultural Revolution in China and its lessons for revolutionaries in the advanced capitalist countries. These fundamental experiences clarified the two approaches we had oscillated between for a long time: on the one hand, identification with the role of "external" vanguard, with all that implies; on the other hand, the possibility of acting, in and through the development of the mass struggle, as the first form of linkage between the mass vanguards.

What does this distinction mean? To what extent does this terminology correspond to a political reality and not simply to a play on words?

We have established a relationship with workers (I mean the mass of workers in particular struggles, and not individual "contacts") based on two closely related principles:

- rejection of the delegation of powers to the bureaucratic workers' organizations (trade unions and CP), and proposing the alternative of autonomous base organizations directly controlled by the workers;
- a political line which begins with the daily problems of the working class (both inside and outside the workplace), and gradually situates these problems in the more general context of the anti-imperialist struggle, etc.

We could have measured the "success" of our work either by the development of the creative autonomy of the masses in struggle or by workers transferring to us the delegation of powers they now give to the unions and the CP. In the second case, we would have enjoyed the confidence of the masses, but in the worst possible way, because we would have reproduced, with a different political content, the same authoritarian relationship with the masses. In fact, we would have become "the party", but the same kind of party we want to fight against. This was the inherent danger in what many many workers said to us in a variety of ways: "Start another union"; "Why don't you call a strike?"; "Why don't you start an organization".

It may be true that workers have the "spirit of organization", but it would be wise to recall what Rosa Luxemburg said to Lenin: "Lenin glorifies the educational influence of the factory on the proletariat, which makes it immediately ripe for 'organization and discipline'. The 'discipline' which Lenin had in mind is implanted in the proletariat not only by the factory but also by the barracks and by modern bureaucratism-- in short, by the whole mechanism of the centralized bourgeois state." We should never forget that during decades of reactionary practice by the unions and the CP, organization was presented to the proletariat only in terms of the vote, of membership cards and blind loyalty to the party apparatus. In these circumstances, it's hardly surprising that the tendency towards

external leadership keeps re-appearing among the proletariat itself. The answer to these problems is not the rejection of all organization, but the proposal of a new type of organization. When we say: "It's not for us to call a strike", or "We have no intention of starting a new union", we don't limit ourselves to a simple refusal of principle, we do much more: we refuse to perpetuate a relationship of passivity, we refuse to allow workers to depend on us to decide something for them. That's also our answer when it's suggested: "Start a new party".

If we were to define ourselves in the long term as an "external" vanguard, then the problem of the formation of the party becomes simply a question of quantity: when the local "influence" of a group is sufficiently developed, and when a sufficient number of politically homogenous local groups (also "external" vanguards) cover the whole country, then we will have the party. It is important to be clear on why we have rejected this approach.

The development of links with a whole series of proletarian groups and the development of the student movement create the conditions for going beyond the provisional role of "external" vanguard, which, although inevitable at a particular stage in the struggle, should not be considered a permanent necessity. This is why the experience of the student movement in 1967-68 has been decisive in clarifying these questions: it was the first mass struggle with a revolutionary perspective which was not controlled by the trade unions and left organizations. What do we mean when we talk about a "mass struggle"? We are obviously referring neither to a "mass party" such as the Italian Communist Party nor to "mass organizations" of the trade union type. When we use the word "mass", it is not the numerical size which counts (although it is an important aspect), but rather the qualitative aspect of the struggle: the fact that a struggle develops among a whole class stratum (in this case, students)-- defined by its place in the social relationships of capitalist production-- on the basis of the conditions specific to that class stratum.

The student movement provided the example of a contestation which, beginning with the specific conditions of a proletarianized class stratum, came to put into question the whole structure of bourgeois power, thus situating its struggle on the terrain of revolutionary struggle. It's true there is a vanguard in the student movement, but its logic is specific: it is a non-institutionalized vanguard which is internal to the mass struggle. In this perspective, such a mass internal vanguard has two problems to confront: (1) avoid becoming detached from the mass struggle, and rather seek to stimulate its development; (2) unite with other revolutionary class strata, particularly workers, to avoid eventual impotency and defeat.

These tasks cannot be accomplished either "spontaneously" or by joining some "external" vanguard. These tasks of political leadership and organization belong to the vanguards of the mass struggle, which are mass, internal vanguards. These vanguards intervene in struggles outside their own class stratum, not as an "external" leadership, but as the internal leadership of its own front of struggle.... Although this perspective doesn't provide any ready-made solutions to the specific problems of revolutionary leadership and organization, it does allow us to recognize for the first time in the development of the student movement the verification in practice of the correctness of a revolutionary line. That's why the political leadership of the student is not "the Party", understood as an external revolutionary leadership. The present task of revolutionary political leadership doesn't consist in developing a general revolutionary line, but in promoting the struggle of the masses and its autonomous self-organization.

Now we are seeing the massive development of workers' and peasants' struggles in Italy, but they are prisoners of the division and repressive control of the counter-revolutionary parties and trade unions as much as of their own lack of organization. In these circumstances, the task of revolutionaries is not to provide an administrative

reference point, a new party, but rather to put themselves at the service of the autonomous organization of the masses. The formation of a general revolutionary leadership and organization must necessarily go through this phase.... After all the theories about the integration of workers in advanced capitalist society, France has given us an idea of what the masses are capable of doing, once liberated even briefly from the repressive yoke of their "representatives". At the same time, May '68 and its aftermath are clear evidence that the imprint of decades of deformations in the workers' movement can't be eliminated overnight.

What does all this mean in terms of organization? First, the rejection of organizational forms which claim from the beginning to be a general political leadership (whether they call themselves party or not), and whose centralization is the result not of the political maturation of the mass struggle, but rather the option of a cadre apparatus. Although the term "central committee" can mean different things in different contexts, it can mean only a totally unacceptable conception of top-down political leadership in the precise context of the struggle in Italy today.

What are our tasks then? Briefly, they are to create the opportunities and the means for links and communication among workers; to discover ways to have workers themselves participate in analyzing their own struggles and drawing lessons from them; to support as much unity in struggle as possible; to maximize the aspect of workers' autonomy in the choice of organizational forms. If we agree that our goal is the growth of mass struggles and their political polarization, we also have to recognize that this can be accomplished only by encouraging, rather than holding back, the autonomy and variety of struggle experiences, while at the same time promoting common discussion and decision-making among the masses about the significance and perspectives of their struggles.

Centralization cannot be a cover clamped on struggles from the outside, but must rather be the progressive result of their theoretical and practical co-ordination, so we can avoid the sort of formalism which makes direct relationships impossible (whether it be the exchange of information or political unity) with different groups, sectors of the movement and isolated comrades. What is most essential is that the development of an overall revolutionary leadership must take place within the mass struggle, and not in a party external or parallel to the mass struggle.

I want to turn now to two important questions which are usually raised in relation to the problem of revolutionary organization. The first is the problem of repression. It can be asked that if we don't have a centralized organization, how can we deal with the repression which is bound to come? At one level, the answer is that the more centralized an organization is, the more it is exposed to repression. A decentralized organization, in the sense of more autonomous groups exercising initiative and responsibility, is the best guarantee against any eventuality. However, at another level, the problem of centralization takes on a different sort of importance when it comes to the question of how we can deal with the class enemy in situations of illegal forms of struggle and armed struggle. Here the argument in favour of centralist positions comes into play: "The mass line is correct, but there is also the problem of seizing power, and the problem of the direct struggle with the bourgeois state apparatus and its destruction." It is important to emphasize this argument over against certain anti-authoritarian positions which, despite their value, often tend to overlook the specific problem of the struggle against the bourgeois state and the problem of the repressive apparatus of the national and international bourgeoisie. However, in dealing with this aspect of the problem, one general principle must be kept in mind at all times: the indispensable condition for the development of an effective and correct centralization of organization is the whole process of mass struggle and links between mass internal vanguards outlined above.

This brings us to the second question. We often hear in our discussions the position that the criterion of organization is its functionality. This position is the most dangerous of all. Functionality means nothing or everything until it is made clear in relation to what it is functional. For us, organization must be functional in relation to the political maturation of militants, to the growth of consciousness and autonomous organization in mass struggles, and to the idea of workers' power we are struggling for. For example, there are at least two conceptions we could have of base committees: either as a form of struggle through which the masses develop the capacity to develop and control their own struggle, or as a "more effective" means of mass mobilization for an external political leadership. The concept of mass vanguard is the only perspective which confronts in practice, not just in party rules, both the problem of the substitution of the party for the masses and the problem of spontaneism as a revolutionary strategy of mass self-organization. We have to "believe in the masses", believe in socialism. We have to understand that power is not seized "on behalf of" the proletariat, but that the proletariat itself has to seize power. The new socialist man and woman will not be born after the smashing of capitalism creates the conditions for this transformation; they will be born during the struggle against capitalism....

Our task today is to build within the mass struggle an organized political leadership, not to "win" the masses to a pre-existing revolutionary leadership. The "cadre party", conceived as an organization of professional militants, ideologically united around a programme and a strict, statutory discipline, is not what we're about.

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