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Classical Marxism and the general strike

There is much talk nowadays about general strikes. One left group calls for a 24-hour general strike, another ups the ante by demanding an escalating series of one-day, two-day, three-day, etc, general strikes. But trumping them all, at least in terms of grandstanding rhetoric, there are those who insist upon the indefinite general strike. Coming in a number of guises - ie, 'All out, stay out', 'TUC, call the general strike' - the underlying assumption is the same. An indefinite general strike is capable of releasing the raw energy of the mass of the working class and bringing the capitalist class to its knees. It is seen, therefore, as the ultimate weapon.

My intention, in this article, is not to assess the relative merits or demerits of any of the above perspectives as regards present-day circumstances. Instead I want to bring into view what classical Marxism had to say about strikes. There are, within this tradition, many elementary lessons ... lessons which surely need to be relearnt.

I begin with a few examples of strikes under pre-capitalist social conditions. Then I turn to strikes under capitalism. Marxism was unmistakably informed by 1830s-40s Chartism. Besides Hegelian philosophy, French socialism and British political economy, Chartism surely deserves an equal status. In other words there were *four* key sources for Marxism.¹ However, almost by definition, assimilating, borrowing from the world's first mass working class party went hand in hand with penetrating insights and criticism of shortcomings.

Eg, Frederick Engels showed how the Chartist movement's much vaunted 'holy month' worked out in practice. We shall also see that later, in terms of the Marx party, it was Engels who took the lead in combating the anarchist general strike strategy. Having discussed the anarchists, I go on to show how the revisionists in the German Social Democratic Party misused these polemics in order to distort the Marxist approach to the whole class struggle. Marx and Engels were transformed, in the telling, from militant revolutionists into tame gradualists.

The 1905 revolution in Russia confounded the revisionists. With the full backing of the latest in bourgeois 'science' they had announced the end of the age of revolution. Unmoved by these backsliders, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (Lenin)

and the Bolsheviks combined the general strike tactic with armed insurrection. That "dress rehearsal" was, of course, triumphantly carried through in 1917.

In the beginning

Sketchy though it may be, pre-class societies provide us with tantalising evidence of what might be called general strikes. Chris Knight, the activist, Marxist and radical anthropologist, argued in his wonderful book *Blood relations* (1991) that some time in the Palaeolithic there was a 'sex strike' (doubtless repeated many times over and in many different places). Specifically he posits a female-led coalition overthrowing alpha male domination and taking collective control over female sexual availability.² This revolution, if it happened, did not come out of the blue. Amongst our chimpanzee and bonobo cousins female-led coalitions regularly form to curb or even send packing bullying or otherwise unacceptable individual alpha males. Primatologists call it "counter-dominance".³ That solidarity is made possible, facilitated, by the constantly made and remade bonds cemented between females and between them and their offspring.

Overthrowing the *system* of alpha male domination necessitated that the "weak combine forces to actively dominate the strong" and imposing a militant egalitarianism.⁴ In other words, amongst humans temporary female-led coalitions had to be made into a permanent form of organisation. It is right to say then that counter-dominance constitutes an integral part of what Marx called our "species being."⁵

Then there are scraps of papyrus discovered at Oxyrhynchus. They reveal how the pyramid builders in ancient Egypt unitedly downed chisel and mallet on more than one occasion in order to press home their petitions demanding

improved rations and living conditions in the necropolis. It is also known that the exhausted state slaves of Athens struck and occupied the silver mines of Laurium in 135-33 BCE. The cradle of western civilisation had them walled in and left to starve.⁵

And, though it is completely non-historic, we have Aristophanes' play, *Lysistrata*. Led by Lysistrata, the women of Athens and Sparta stage a sex strike with the aim of ending the gruelling Peloponnesian war (431-404 BCE) between the two city-states. Surely this was more than a farcical idea designed to get belly laughs from the all-male audiences at the Theatre of Dionysus - for sexual gratification these men had ready access to prostitutes or *hetairai* courtesans. Every fiction has a grain of truth. Maybe in this case some dim memory of resistance to what Engels called the "world historical defeat of the female sex" that happened with the emergence of class society in the Neolithic.⁶

In the corporate feudal town apprentices and journeymen, with the coordination provided by their well established societies, could win real advances. Nevertheless their strikes were little more than small acts of indiscipline within a highly fragmented, workshop-based, patriarchal system of craft production. Other guild masters regarded them as not much more than a family squabble and an irritating example that others might be tempted to follow. Writing about pre-industrial England, Edward Thompson makes the telling point that such "insubordination of the poor was an inconvenience; it was not a menace."⁷

However, the main collective form of class struggle employed by those below in ancient and feudal times was not the strike. From Spartacus to Wat Tyler, from king Jesus to Thomas Müntzer, the popular classes punctured the

supposedly seamless fabric of official society with utopian and sometimes despairing revolt - riot in the city, jacquerie in the countryside. Such uprisings could on occasion force upon the upper classes conditions which they regarded as onerous - not the least of which was democracy. Yet for all their rights, the Athenian peasant-citizen, the Roman plebeian, the Icelandic yeoman farmer existed in a subordinate position within an oligarchic, slave-owning system.

And there was always the danger of the aristocrats of birth or wealth regaining their unrestricted rule. The popular crowd, the so-called mob, can be bribed, corrupted, diverted by those who possess the tremendous advantages of money, education, social connections and many opportunities for patronage. Because of simple geography the peasant is in general highly dispersed to begin with. So, even when united revolt overcomes the tyranny of distance, the moment of collective triumph over the manor or town can never be permanent. Peasants are pulled back into helpless separation by the irresistible need to plant and harvest. The rulers deserved to fail. But even when the ruled successfully revolted, they could not provide a viable social alternative which abolished the reproduction of class relations.

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

Hence the classic form of the bourgeois revolution was the barricade behind which stood the people who had been won to believe that they were fighting for *liberté, égalité, fraternité* - or something broadly equivalent.

*Pre-modern *Homo sapiens* females were, it seems, already synchronising their menstrual cycles according to the monthly rhythm of the moon - a unity which diminished the likelihood of the alpha male monopolising each and every fertile female in the group. Females also cooperated closely in the upbringing of offspring. Far more closely than amongst chimps, bonobos and gorillas. Grandmothers, aunts, sisters, etc, were recruited as carers and providers of food. However, so goes comrade Knight's theory, it was the female-led revolution which ended alpha male domination and took collective control over sexual availability, which transformed the male sex, previously leisured, into a productive sex. Ending alpha male domination and countering male sexual jealousy allowed long-distance big-game hunting. For well over 100,000 years the life of the human group revolved around the phases of the moon and the practice of group marriage. For two weeks in the month men were husbands, there was pleasure, story-telling, feasting and dancing. For the other two weeks, however, the women excluded themselves. Put another way, there was a monthly sex strike. The men stopped being husbands and reverted to being brothers. Heterosexual sex was taboo and the men were expected to join the hunt. Not that what they killed belonged to them. Hunters had to hand over the raw meat to their wives, her parents, her children and other kin. A system of primitive communism that still survives in various parts of Africa. Eg, the San people in Namibia.

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But, whatever dreams were spinning in their heads objectively, while they remained under bourgeois hegemony, the participants fought not for the rights of man, but public debt and a home market fit for capitalist accumulation and the unrestricted exploitation of man by man.

Modern proletariat

Haunting the rise of bourgeoisdom and the consolidation of the capitalist state - whether monarchical or plutocratic - was the ever-present threat of popular democracy. Levellers and *sans culottes* wanted a political system that would have severely curbed the power of capital. However, the greatest threat to capitalism was its own creation - the modern proletariat. Driven off the land through countless enclosure acts, criminalised by vagrancy laws, outcompeted by the factory system, the mass of the population were torn from the means of production. Henceforth, they could only survive from the wages that come from selling the commodity, labour-power. Sucked into mines, shipyards, factories, mills and other workplaces, packed into the fetid slums of Manchester, Liverpool, Salford, Birmingham, Glasgow, etc, the 'swinish multitude' was transformed not only by a new common subordination to capital, but through their own counter-dominance strategies they made themselves into a class that stood opposed to capital.

Marx and Engels were emphatic: individuals become a class only to the extent that "they have to carry on a common battle with another class".⁸ A common struggle, it ought to be emphasised, conducted both by employed and unemployed workers alike - the latter including, of course, not only those who today are in receipt of Jobseekers' Allowance, but full-time child carers, pensioners, the incapacitated, school students, etc. In short, by all those who rely on the 'wage fund'. So it was not only material conditions of everyday life - work, housing, education and leisure - which moulded workers into a class, but the organisation of trade unions, correspondence societies, co-ops, tenant associations, education institutes, political parties, etc.

EP Thompson considers that the working class in England was formed through self-making economic, political and cultural struggle between the years 1780 and 1832; by which time most "working people came to feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers".⁹

Marx and Engels were among the first to grasp the universal nature of this new class. Uniquely, because of its place in history, relationship to other classes and separation from the means of production, it had an inescapable interest not only in improving its own lot. The working class is propelled towards collectivist solutions, solutions which ultimately must have as their objective the abolition of all class relations and the full liberation of humanity.

Those who own no means of production - but who have successfully sold their ability to labour - have a ready and for them self-evident weapon to achieve their immediate ends, no matter how limited: the collective withdrawal of labour-power. Hence primitive forms of class struggle such as theft and the smashing of machines soon gave way to the formation of unions, negotiations and strikes against an individual employer or set of employers. That

hardly means that once a strike begins there is a pre-set mechanism which takes workers up an inexorable series of organisational, political and ideological steps which culminates in final liberation. There isn't.

Engels was only too aware of the limitations of trade unions and economic strikes. He pithily comments, in 1845, that the history of the unions has been "a long series of defeats of the workingmen, interrupted by a few isolated victories."¹⁰ Faced with the unforgiving storms of constantly reoccurring commercial downturns, the cavalry, artillery and prisons of the state, the inbuilt class biases of the legal system, the ability of employers to recruit scabs and the relative paucity of union funds, the contest between labour and capital was always grossly unequal. Despite that, "as schools of war, the unions are unexcelled".¹¹ Through patiently organising, through acting as one, through debating competing ideas, demands and programmes, trade unions help develop the consciousness of the working class.

In and of itself, what Marx called in his pamphlet *Wages, price and profit* the "incessant struggle" in the workplaces can only be a matter of resistance to the encroachments of capital.¹² This "incessant struggle" is no different in essence then from the resistance of artisans, slaves, peasants and journeymen of previous times. That explains why during the early stages of capitalism communistic philosophers - eg, Fourier, Owen, Saint-Simon, etc - were capable of savagely critiquing capitalism and pointing to the necessity of transcending class society. However, they could only concoct vague, hopeless, fanciful schemes. The workers were seen as victims of oppression, not a class that alone could, by liberating itself, liberate humanity.

When it came to the growing self-assertiveness of the workers, Marx and Engels stressed the interrelationship and yet at the same time the distinction between economic and political struggles. The strike to compel a particular employer, or a particular set of employers, to up wages or reduce hours is and will remain a purely economic struggle (and therefore a containable movement of the underclass). On the other hand, a strike to force through a general wage increase - or defend general hours, working conditions or pension provisions - is political. Why? Because such a strike has as its objective the enforcement of common interests "in a general form, in a form possessing general, coercive force": ie, such a strike contains within it the seeds of a new social hegemony.¹³

It is not a neat either-or. Through, or out of, the training provided by separate economic struggles, the conditions are created for the political movement through which the working class confronts the state. Strikes affect the immediate employers. They also, if they are generalised, if they raise common interests, threaten not only the profits of other individual capitalists, but the collective power: ie, the "political power of the ruling class".¹⁴

Having been cleaved into separate categories by the rise of capitalism, economics and politics come together again in the working class. After even the first few steps the generalised economic struggle takes on new dimensions. Confronted by the united bloc of money, law, police and media, workers are predisposed to search out

socialist and communist ideas, above all the ideas of Marxism: ie, their own self-knowing, scientific theory.

Holy month

Marx and Engels intransigently argued against the proposition that the working class could liberate itself by the simple device of staging one big general strike. Given the division of labour that existed between them, it was almost always the latter who took the lead in the associated polemics.

On a number of occasions Engels understandably referred back to his pathfinding book - published in 1845 when he was only in his mid-20s - *The condition of the working class in England*. I shall do the same. In it, after all, Engels touched upon how in 1839 the world's first proletarian mass party, the British Chartists, agreed a resolution calling for a 'holy month'.

Needless to say, this had nothing to do with the veneration of saints or the worship of god. It was a proposed month-long general strike which - or so its advocates thought - would be more than enough to get the Tory government to meet their, in effect, revolutionary demands for universal male suffrage, annual parliaments, secret voting, etc. The six demands of the Charter were designed, at least by the movement's left wing, to push open the doors to the social republic.

Such a perspective of using strike action for political ends demonstrably had its origins in the Grand National Holiday canvassed by William Benbow; the lectures of John Francis Bray; the Society for National Regeneration, with its recommendation of a general strike in order to achieve the eight-hour day, etc.

Anyhow, meeting in London at the beginning of February 1839, the General Convention of the Industrious Classes saw the moral-force wing of Chartism soundly beaten. James Cobbett pleaded for exclusively peaceful methods and cementing a deal with the Liberals. In effect Cobbett represented the "lower middle class", a class still unenfranchised and badly affected by the economic downturn of 1837-39, but a class with no stomach for revolution.¹⁵

By contrast, the physical-force Chartists, the proletarian wing of the movement, urged the holy month. A general strike which they stressed would have to be protected from unofficial and official attack by well-drilled popular militias.**

The main debate at the London convention took place within the frame of this perspective. There were those like Richard Marsden who banked on immediate action. Others - eg, Bronterre O'Brien - recommended delay in order to prepare the ground. In the event no clear decision was made. And over the next few years the Chartist movement suffered not only from a loss of direction and courage, but from numerous well-targeted arrests by the authorities. The party fractured into a series of localised protests and uprisings. Eg, Newport, November 1839.

Chartism revived in the 1840s, but continued to prove itself incapable of decisive action. Ironically, as explained in Engels' book, it was the bourgeoisie of industrial northern England

**Note: Before the passing of the 1903 Pistol Act and the 1920 Firearms Act it was perfectly legal to purchase and carry arms - as it is in the US, a right enshrined in its constitution. And on the ground the Chartists were busy equipping themselves with pikes and muskets.

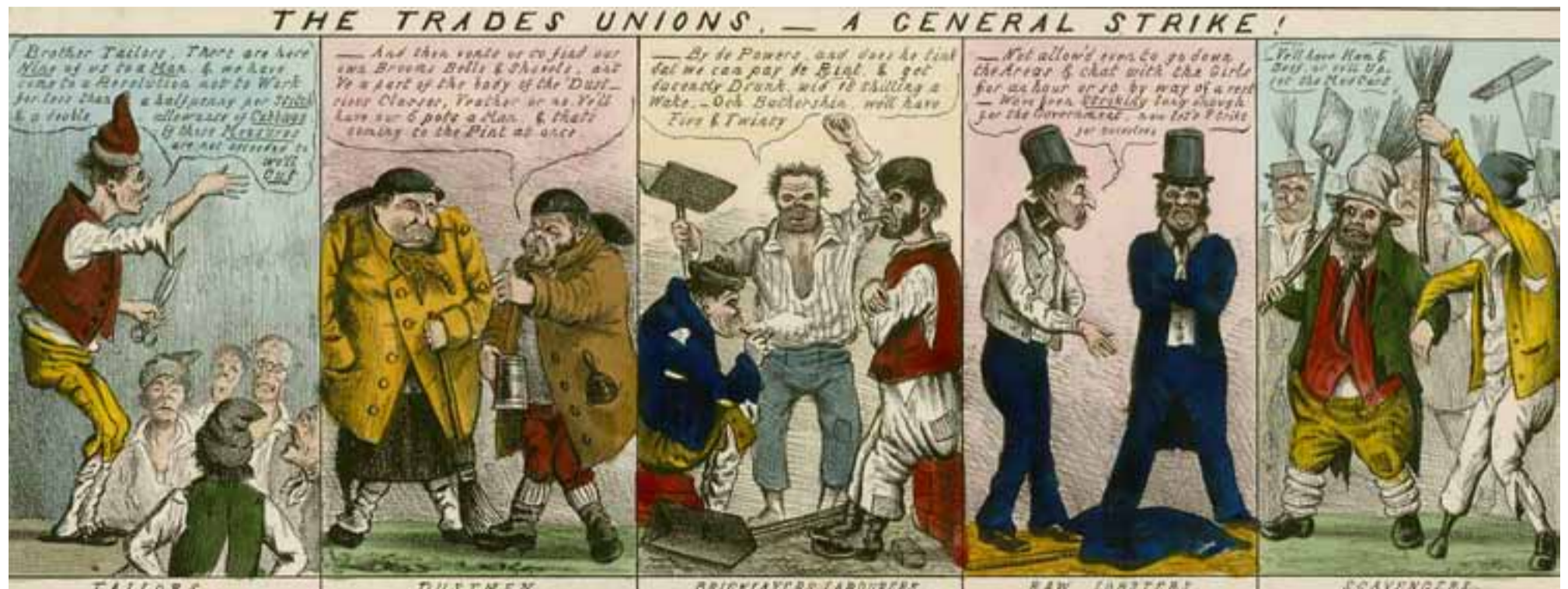
who were responsible for putting the 'holy month' to the test in July 1842. It was not, Engels commented, that the workers wished to quit work, but that the manufacturers "wished to close their mills and send the operatives into the country parishes upon the property of the aristocracy".¹⁶

Putting aside their social contract with the aristocracy and their law-abiding creed of moral persuasion, the industrial bourgeoisie seems to have provoked, or taken advantage of, a general strike in order to use the working class as pawns. Letting loose proletarian anger was meant, in Richard Cobden's words, to "frighten the aristocracy" - so much so that it would bow before demands for the repeal of the Corn Laws and bring the industrial bourgeoisie one step nearer the day when it could finally crown itself as the governing class.

The Corn Laws kept the price of gain artificially high by levying a protective duty on imports. Here was a piece of legislation first introduced in 1804 by a parliament dominated by landed interests and blatantly serving their own narrow interests. Naturally they were much resented and fought over. Especially by the class of industrial capitalists. Big landlords maintained their enormous estates and bloated fortunes, but for the mass of the population that meant a high price for bread and for the employers an upward pressure on the price of labour-power.

However, counterrevolutionary war with France had flung backwards the burgeoning radical and revolutionary movement in Britain and imposed internal conditions of reaction, oppression and arbitrariness whereby the most parasitic elements could hang on to governing power and thereby continue to live at the expense of the bourgeois nation. After many blood-curdling threats, the industrial bourgeoisie secured full voting entry into the parliamentary political system with the Reform Act of 1832. Thompson suggests that this resolved a revolutionary situation in Britain and hence prevented an explosion that would have undoubtedly gone way beyond the Jacobin Year II of France. Maybe even putting political power into the hands of a British version of the Enragés.¹⁷ As for the Corn Laws, a combination of Anti-Corn Law League agitation and famine in Ireland was eventually responsible for their final repeal in June 1846.

Though capitalism was now the dominant mode of production, even after the decisive reformist moment of 1832 the industrial bourgeoisie failed to constitute itself an independent - let alone dominant - political force in parliament. Except for the handful of Radicals, the industrial bourgeoisie continued to line up behind the Whig Party (a prefiguration of the reformist entry of working class voters onto the parliamentary scene less than half a century later). Capital exercised power not through a bourgeois political class, but socially, as a dominant mode of production. The landed aristocracy - which had through capitalist farming and charging capitalist ground rent on mines become bourgeoisified - continued to staff the governing heights throughout the 19th century. Between 1818 and 1900 there was no discernible increase in the number of commoners in British cabinets. Indeed before Edward Heath most Tory leaders boasted long aristocratic pedigrees.



Anyway, back to July 1842. Predictably, because the industrial bourgeoisie and their Anti-Corn Law League led from behind; because for those below there was no clear goal in mind; because the workers were driven into revolt by a plan hatched from above; because none wished to be shot for the sake of ending the Corn Laws; the whole thing did not take long to fizzle out. For our purposes, however, it is particularly germane that at its height the general strike “involved up to half a million workers and covered an area which stretched from Dundee and the Scottish coalfields to south Wales and Cornwall”.¹⁸

An independent working class politics was being shaped - politics which went much further than those resulting from the simple antagonism that is by definition endemic between employer and employee. Economic demands were joined with demands “for the revolutionary transformation of society”.¹⁹

As well as striking against pay cuts and short-time working, and ‘sweeping’ out those still in the factories, workers burnt the property of those they particularly hated and stormed workhouses - loathed by the poor and loved by the free-market liberals. Led by Thomas Cooper, a minority argued that there ought to be a physical-force insurrection to carry through the programme of Chartism. The majority, this time around Feargus O’Connor, agreed, but once again considered such a move premature.²⁰

For the industrial bourgeoisie it was all too much. The propertyless were threatening “the destruction of those who had property”.²¹ Having been released and shown itself self-willed and uncontrollable, the proletariat had to be returned to their pokey hovels and hellish workplaces. The industrial bourgeoisie resumed a constitutional stance, abandoned its last Jacobin vestiges and moved to place itself at the service of the government. Its trusted retainers were armed and sworn in as special constables and in Preston were given the command to fire upon the crowd. The unintentional general strike therefore stood opposed not only by the government, but by all exploiting classes.

After the events of July 1842 a string of Chartist leaders were arrested, prosecuted and sentenced to vindictive terms of imprisonment. There were, nonetheless, positive consequences. The middle classes, and crucially the industrial bourgeoisie, “decisively” separated themselves off from the working class.²² Chartism freed itself from its hangers-on and became a purely proletarian movement. The British industrial bourgeoisie had burnt its fingers trying to manipulate working class revolution. Suitably chastised, it refused any longer to indulge in physical-force talk. Fear of the working class weighed far more heavily than dissatisfaction with the governing landed aristocracy.

Polemics with the anarchists

Despite the negative experience of history’s first proletarian general strike, the idea was taken up by socialists in France and Belgium after the failure of the 1848 revolutions. That said, it was the anarchists, under the leadership of Mikhail Bakunin (1814-76), who made the general strike *strategy* their own. Bakunin, a Russian, a Slavophile and a violent anti-Semite, was one of anarchism’s founders and perhaps still its seminal ideologist.

He was also a dedicated revolutionary. In February 1848 he participated in the Paris revolution, was imprisoned in Saxony in 1849 and handed over to the tsarist authorities. Exiled to Siberia, he managed to escape in 1861. However, as a celebrated member of the First International, from 1864 onwards, he waged a fierce factional struggle against its general council led by Marx.

Bakunin contemptuously dismissed any participation in parliamentary elections, rejected outright the organisation of the working class into a political party and railed against all political authority. He certainly wanted nothing to do with the conquest of state power by the working class.

Nevertheless, as a determined advocate of ‘propaganda by deed’, Bakunin gave strikes a central place in his programme. They “awaken” in the masses “the feeling of the deep antagonism which exists between their interests and those of the bourgeoisie”. Almost inevitably therefore, the general strike became the prime lever which would bring about the social revolution for Bakunin: “a general strike can result only in a great cataclysm which forces society to shed its old skin”.²³ The “ultimate strike is the general strike”, he emphatically declared.

Yet, though it was to be carried out in the name of the entire labouring population - ie, including the peasantry and lumpenproletariat - his aim was to put into power a revolutionary elite. A revolutionary elite numbering perhaps a mere hundred. They would rule through, at least in Bakunin’s fantasies, an elaborate international of secret, strictly hierarchical organisations.

For all of Bakunin’s incessant chatter about “libertarianism” and “abolishing authority”, what he actually envisaged was a new social order run by a “collective, invisible dictatorship”²⁴ ... with “Citizen B” - ie, himself - at its commanding pinnacle.²⁵ Hence, though declaring himself, and his fellow anarchists, “the most pronounced enemies of every sort of *official power* - even if it is an ultra-revolutionary power”, Bakunin believed he could “direct a people’s revolution” through “invisible pilots”.²⁶

His “unseen and undeclared” cabal would not admit its existence; nevertheless, strangely, incongruously, unbelievably, his “invisible dictatorship” would not be “imposed on anyone”.²⁷ Either way, naturally, the masses, the “rabble”, had to be manipulated, treated as dupes.

Engels mercilessly tore into Bakunin’s general strike perspective, not least in his pamphlet *The Bakuninists at work*. “One fine morning,” he mocked, the anarchists imagine “all the workers in all the industries of a country, or even of the whole world, stop work, thus forcing the propertied classes either humbly to submit within four weeks at most, or to attack the workers, who would then have the right to defend themselves and use the opportunity to pull down the entire old society.”²⁸

Events in Spain in 1873 gave an “unsurpassed example of how a revolution should *not* be made”. Here was a country where at the time the anarchists enjoyed a considerable following. Confronted by a serious revolutionary situation, however, the anarchists were compelled to ditch virtually their entire programme. Instead of abstaining from political and electoral activity and abolishing the state, they constituted themselves an impotent rump within an archipelago of unmistakably bourgeois ‘cantonal’ governments.

Moreover, finding themselves drawn into useless, senseless and uncoordinated uprisings, their only remaining so-called principle of federation and local autonomy gave counterrevolution the initiative and allowed it to concentrate its forces and crush one town at a time before turning to the next.

Obviously anarchist politics stood in flat contradistinction to the living economic and political struggle. Nevertheless, even as the Spanish fiasco unfolded, the hopeless utopianism of its general strike strategy could still be found cropping up in their pronouncements. Despite that, at the September 1873 Geneva congress of the anarchist Alliance of Social Democracy, it was admitted that to carry out the general strike strategy, there had to be a perfect organisation of the working class and a bottomless strike fund.

Engels had no problem in pointing out that here was the “rub”. On the one hand, no government would sit idly by while workers slowly accumulated their pennies and pounds for such a project. On the other hand, almost by definition, the real class struggle would bring about the liberation of the working class long before any perfect organisation, especially with colossal reserves of funds, had ever been achieved.

Furthermore, if by some strange quirk such an organisation had been built, then surely there would be no need for the “roundabout way of the general strike” in order to attain the objects of the working class.

Instead of the anarchist general strike strategy, what Marx-Engels banked on was the organisation of the working class into trade unions, co-ops, sports associations, educational institutes, mass political parties, etc. A strategy of organisation in depth embodied by the Second International.

General madness

Formed in 1889, the Second International expanded at a fantastic pace. By the early years of the 20th century it included within its ranks every mass working class party in the world (they were often newly formed). Unlike the First International - which was a much smaller, but broader affair, embracing not only Marxists, but Proudhonists, Blanquists, Owenites and British trade unionists, as well as anarchists - the Second International accepted Marxism as its natural world outlook. (Bakunin and his anarchists were expelled from the First International at its Hague congress in 1872. A similar fate befell their co-thinkers at the Second International’s 1896 congress in London.) Anarchism soon found itself completely marginalised, losing almost all the influence it once enjoyed.

The Second International grew in an extended period of social peace. Fertile conditions for many of its parties and their most prominent leaders to be seduced by the specialised business of trade unionism, parliamentarianism, journalism ... and the bourgeoisie. Hence there was a large body of influential social democratic theoreticians, editors, MPs, officials and trade union functionaries who wanted to forget (even censor) the countless and very inconvenient revolutionary statements found in the writings of the Marx-Engels team. How, for example, they called for a principled programme, the breaking apart of the capitalist state and republican democracy: ie, the class rule of the working class. Instead, all that was recalled were attacks on the anarchists - who were now little more than

a phantom - not least with their dreams of the general strike making the revolution.

It is true that in 1891 and 1893 workers in Belgium staged 24-hour general strikes to force the government to extend the franchise. That in 1903 a strike on the Dutch railways grew into a brief general strike. That in Italy, in 1904, a wave of violent strikes saw bloody street fighting in various cities. Nevertheless, among most theoreticians of the workers’ movement, the general strike was disdainfully seen as something primitive or unobtainably utopian. In that spirit the German opportunist, Ignaz Auer, coined the catchphrase, “*Generalstreik ist Generalunsinn*” (general strike is general nonsense).

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

From general strike to insurrection

Russia’s first revolution started on January 9 1905, a cold and terrible Sunday.*** Partially through stupidity, partially through premeditated plan, tsarist troops were ordered to open fire on the huge march led by the priest (and police dupe), Gregory Gapon (1870-1906). Pushed on by disgust with the futile Russo-Japanese war, mass deprivation and a crop of economic strikes, he had intended submitting a half-humble and, because of communist agitation, half-threatening petition to the ‘little father’ in his St Petersburg Winter Palace.

It listed almost every popular grievance and demand. Everything from workshops open to “draughts, rain and snow”, withdrawal of the navy from abroad, the eight-hour day, “separation of church and state”, to the convening of a Constituent Assembly elected by “universal, secret and equal suffrage” - the “most important of our requests”. In its final peroration, the famous petition bluntly and ominously stated that there were only “two paths”. Either “happiness and freedom” or the “grave”.²⁹

Tsarism horrifically proved it was the path to the grave. In the hail of bullets hundreds were killed, thousands more injured. Exact figures are impossible to calculate because the tsarist authorities did their best to hide their crime - the dead were secretly buried.

Gapon all of a sudden found himself world-famous. From afar his mix of Ezekiel and Marx made him appear some sort of new age prophet. Fakir he was. But not one destined to be Russia’s Gandhi, its Mahdi, its Makarios or its Khomeini. Even while his “halo of indignation” dazzled liberal opinion and his “pastor’s curses” still rained down on the tsar’s head, the communists had emerged from the underground and after overcoming initial mistrust began to exert a decisive influence over the people.

Initiative slipped from the petty bourgeois individual, the insubstantial Gapon, and slowly passed to the proletarian party, the “politically conscious workers who had been through the school of socialism”. Again in the words of one of its foremost future leaders, a certain Lev Bronstein, it formed “an

***Before February 1 1918 the Julian calendar was in use in Russia. This is 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar; therefore January 9 in the Russia of 1905 corresponds to January 22, according to the calendar we use.



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iron ring” around Gapon, “a ring from which he could not have broken loose even if he had wanted to.”³⁰ So it was not the naive orthodox priest employed at a St Petersburg transit prison, but the working class which was to be the tsar’s real protagonist.

The January 9 massacre - Bloody Sunday, as it instantly became known - provoked outrage and a rolling nationwide general strike. One million workers stopped work. They took to the streets and shook the tsar and the whole autocratic system to its foundations. Without any guiding strategy, in many cases without advancing any clear demands; stopping, starting, “obedient only to the instinct of solidarity”; for almost two months the “strike ruled the land.”³¹

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

October was its herald. Trumpeted by a strike on the Moscow-Kazan railway, things quickly and enormously fanned out in terms of numbers, character and prospects. Isolated trade union strikes again became general political strikes. Demonstrations united workers and radical students around revolutionary slogans. Strike committees came together to establish workers’ councils or soviets - organs of struggle - and, as Lenin was soon to appreciate, “embryonic forms of a new revolutionary authority.”³²

Clearly the situation had changed since January. What was unconscious had, like the human embryo, nine months after conception become conscious. Now the revolution possessed a guiding strategy. Now it had clear political demands. Now, for the most advanced detachments, the call for general strike was combined with preparation for armed uprising. Responsibility for this qualitative development rested entirely with the Communist Party - the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, as it was then known - and its power and prestige, which with every month grew in leaps and bounds.

On the eve of the revolution, in January 1905, the Bolsheviks consisted of no more than 8,400 members. By the spring of 1906 membership of the reunited Russian Social Democratic Labour Party stood at 48,000, of whom 34,000 were Bolsheviks and 14,000 Mensheviks. In October of that year membership exceeded 70,000 and in 1907 the figures given at the London congress show that there were 84,000 members (that did not include the Bund, and the Polish and Lettish sections). The Bolsheviks were still the largest trend with 46,000 supporters, compared to the Mensheviks’ 38,000.³³

To organise and make effective the sudden release of popular anger and surge of self-movement, Lenin had quite rightly almost straightaway demanded the opening up of the party and mass recruitment, especially of young workers. This was, as shown by Lars T Lih, fully in line with his ideas outlined in his celebrated 1902 pamphlet *What is to be done?*³⁴ Far from wanting to build the party under the thumb of a conspiratorial elite, as often wrongly charged, Lenin always exhibited a fervent belief in the creativity and revolutionary enthusiasm of the party’s rank and file and the broad mass of the working class. Organisationally his aim was a Russian version of the German Social Democratic Party, certainly not a Marxist version of Bakunin’s “invisible dictatorship”.

The fact of the matter was that communists in Russia could operate with considerable freedom on the changed terrain. The battle lines had shifted. The enemy’s defences had been breached, its forces were in disarray and those of the workers in rapid advance. Tsarism was powerless to prevent the flow of ideas and growth of the party. Exiles returned from Britain, Switzerland, France and Siberia as popular heroes. The cadres, formed until then without the oxygen of open mass activity and trained only by internal faction fights, no longer worked underground, no longer operated as persecuted committee men.

Now they led and gave political clarity to an army of trade unions, student societies and workers’ soviets which had sprung up like the dragons’ teeth of Aetes. Standing before the people as tribunes of the oppressed, the communists addressed mass meetings by the

score, legally published and widely circulated their literature, and encadred a generation - workers and students joined the party in their tens of thousands and fused into a single alloy. Lenin wholeheartedly welcomed the fact that “revolutionary workers and radical students no longer regarded each other as outsiders at open actions by the people.”³⁵

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

The Bolsheviks gave an excellent answer:

You regard Russian workers as little children, you want to ‘arm them with consciousness’; but that time has passed; they have the consciousness, now they need to be armed with rifles to strike at the tsar and the bourgeoisie.³⁶

Only an armed people could defend themselves and their new-found liberties. Only an armed people could look to the future with confidence. Only an armed people could win over sections of the tsar’s army. As Lenin said, “The sooner the proletariat succeeds in arming, and the longer it holds its fighting positions as striker and revolutionary, the sooner will the army begin to waver; more and more soldiers will at last begin to realise what they are doing and they will join sides with the people against the fiends, against the tyrant, against the murderers of defenceless workers and of their wives and children.”³⁷

If October was the herald, December was the decisive moment. Generalised political strikes once more broke out across the country. Demonstrations attracted ever greater numbers. Soviets began to exercise local power. The hour had arrived for nationwide insurrection. This time Moscow, not St Petersburg, was the torch-bearer. The St Petersburg soviet, first under the Menshevik Khrustalev, and then under Trotsky and Parvus - two outstanding Mensheviks who were moving away from Menshevism - decided against a physical confrontation with tsarism. Trotsky, writing before he became a Bolshevik, pleads in mitigation that the “indecision” in the capital could be explained “by the fact that the Petersburg workers realised very clearly that this time it was not a matter of a strike or demonstration, but a life or death struggle.”³⁸

Moscow did not flinch before that challenge. Its Bolshevik leadership had been getting ready for months. Workplace meetings had declared for an uprising. Fraternisation with the local garrison produced a soldiers’ soviet. Party cells were established in the army. Weapons illegally imported from abroad. Workers instructed in their use. Fighting detachments were formed too ... The people had been armed!

Though members of the Moscow Bolshevik committee had just been arrested, the decision was made to go ahead. On December 7 it began. Key buildings were seized. Barricades webbed the city. Against enormous odds, but with the active support of its proletarian population, some thousand guerrillas broke the grip of tsarism in Moscow for nine days. Operating in small units of three or four, these *druzhinniki* “proved”, in Lenin’s words, that the “open, armed struggle of the people is possible even against modern troops.”³⁹

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

Engels was right when back in 1882 he suggested that Russia constituted the world’s revolutionary centre: “Today ... Russia forms the vanguard of revolutionary action in Europe.”⁴⁰

The December 1905 uprising was therefore not simply a local event. It was a precursor, a mirror of what was to come in other countries. Marx’s old mole had resurfaced in Moscow. Where it would burrow next in time and space no-one could tell, but clearly capitalism as a whole was facing a new general crisis. After over three decades, the era of peaceful parliamentarianism and trade unionism was coming to an end. A new era had arrived - an era of revolution. That meant new tasks and new tactics.

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

Eg, James Connolly was particularly impressed by how Moscow had advanced barricade tactics. Writing in May 1915, he wrote how it was “wise” that, unlike the French revolutionaries of an earlier time, the Russians did not “man the barricades”, but used surprise tactics, attacking only when the enemy was in “range of their inferior weapons”.⁴¹

The revolution had through its own momentum created alternative organs of power on the pattern of the 1871 Paris Commune: ie, workers’ soviets. That this had been done with a general strike acting as midwife in no way refuted Marx and Engels. On the contrary it bore out their method and showed that the anarchist strategy of overthrowing the bourgeoisie with one big general strike was a non-starter. The land of Bakunin’s birth provided an unsurpassed example of how to make a revolution. Yet no thanks to the marginalised anarchists. It was the Marxists who led and gave the general strikes, mass demonstrations and urban uprisings their revolutionary programme. Even the terroristic Socialist Revolutionaries claimed, albeit falsely, to be followers of Marx.

Not only did the anarchists play no significant role whatsoever, but the idea of a general strike as a panacea was explicitly rejected. Not only was the general strike as a tactic - “essential under certain conditions” - discovered; so too were its limitations.⁴² The spontaneous general strike might have sounded the approach of revolution. However, even if led by the mass party of the working class, it could not take things to the finish. To do that an armed uprising was necessary.

That is why Lenin argued in the course of the revolution that as an “independent and predominant form of struggle” the general strike was “out of date”. The combination of general strike and insurrection was needed. That was the main lesson Lenin wanted to drive home, when it came to the temporary reunification of the Bolshevik and Menshevik wings of the RSDLP in 1906. In the “tactical platform for the unity congress” the Bolsheviks wanted amongst other points the following accepted:

With further growth of the movement, the peaceful general strike proved inadequate, while partial recourse to it failed its aim and disorganised the forces of the proletariat In the present stage of the movement, the general political strike must be regarded not so much as an independent means of struggle as an auxiliary means in relation to insurrection; that therefore the timing of such a strike, and the choice of its place and of the industries it is to involve, should preferably depend upon the time and circumstances of the main form of struggle: namely, the armed uprising.⁴³

Needless to say, most Mensheviks were not prepared to accept any such thing. For Georgi Plekhanov, leader of the Mensheviks, the key lesson of the Moscow uprising was that “they should not have taken up arms.”⁴⁴ A view shared in no uncertain terms by the right wing of the SDP in Germany - by far the most prestigious party in the Second International.

Those deputies in its large parliamentary fraction who had grown complacent in that self-important little world, those who enjoyed incomes far above the average worker, those who had been seduced by the chumminess of their fellow parliamentarians, those who had come to view themselves not as servants of the labour movement, but as its masters, viewed not only Moscow’s barricades and guerrillas with disquiet, but Russia’s general strikes as well. Though social

tensions were becoming more intense, general strikes would be completely out of place in the fatherland, they chorused.

True, the Jena congress of the party in 1905 adopted a resolution moved by August Bebel which agreed to the use of the general strike. Yet only in defence of the franchise! But in February 1906 the SDP’s central committee secretly agreed with the trade union leaders not to implement the Jena resolution. Despite that, in the following years the Second International, in which the German party played a vanguard role, passed a number of resolutions which threatened the use of any means - and everyone knew that also meant a general strike - in the event of an inter-imperialist war.⁴⁵ In the same year the Cologne trade union congress scandalously ruled out any discussion of the question. To do otherwise would be “playing with fire”.

Conclusion

On August 4 1914 the parliamentary fraction of the SDP betrayed the working class and went over to the bourgeoisie by voting for the kaiser’s war budget and social peace. A phenomenon not isolated to Germany, but repeated almost everywhere in the so-called civilised world.

Of course, following this horrendous, murderous experience some concluded that the workers’ movement, the whole movement for socialism and human freedom, should dispense with a big, centralised, organisational apparatus and do without full-time officials and experienced functionaries. Instead of slowly building trade unions, co-ops, a national press, a mass political party and winning a clear and active social majority for socialism, there should be a reliance on spontaneous actions: eg, an anarchist-type indefinite general strike strategy.

Orthodox Marxists, on other hand, looked to democracy as our main weapon against bureaucracy and betrayal. Regular elections and the right to recall, the freedom to criticise and form temporary or permanent factions, *combined* with an ever more powerful organisation, surely provide the best conditions to conduct the class struggle for socialism. Obviously, however, all of that needs further discussion and debate ●

Jack Conrad

Notes

1. Lenin, of course, wrote a famous little article in 1913 called ‘The three sources and three component parts of Marxism’.
2. For my own account of the human revolution see J Conrad, ‘Origins of religion and the human revolution’ *Weekly Worker* December 17 2009.
3. See C Boehm *Hierarchy of the forest* Harvard 2001.
4. *Ibid* p3.
5. See GEM de Ste Croix *The class struggle in the ancient world* London 1983, p562.
6. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 26, Moscow 1990, p165.
7. EP Thompson *Customs in common* London 1991, p42.
8. K Marx *Pre-capitalist economic formations* London 1978, p132.
9. EP Thompson *The making of the English working class* Harmondsworth 1981, p11.
10. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 4, London 1975, p505.
11. *Ibid* p512.
12. K Marx and F Engels *Selected works* Moscow 1968, p224.
13. *Ibid* p683.
14. *Ibid*.
15. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 4, London 1975, p518.
16. F Engels *The condition of the working class in England* Harmondsworth 1972, p257.
17. See EP Thompson *The poverty of theory* London 1981, pp257-66.
18. M Jenkins *The general strike of 1842* London 1980, p21.
19. *Ibid* p23.
20. See D Thompson *The Chartists* Aldershot 1986, pp271-98.
21. The lord chief justice, quoted in M Jenkins *The general strike of 1842* London 1980, p15.
22. F Engels *The condition of the working class in England* Harmondsworth 1972, p259.
23. <http://struggle.ws/anarchism/writers/anarcho/history/bakunin.html>.
24. Letter to Albert Richard 1879 - see www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bakunin/works/1870/albert-richard.htm.
25. Quoted in H Draper *Karl Marx’s theory of revolution* Vol 4, New York 1990, p147.
26. Letter to Albert Richard, June 2 1870.
27. Letter to Sergei Nechaev.
28. K Marx, F Engels *CW* Vol 23, Moscow 1988, p584.
29. Quoted in N Harding (ed) *Marxism in Russia* Cambridge 1983, p312.
30. L Trotsky *1905* Harmondsworth 1973, p93.
31. *Ibid* p98.
32. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 10, Moscow 1977, p155.
33. Figures from M Liebman *Leninism under Lenin* London 1980, p47.
34. LT Lih *Lenin rediscovered* Chicago 2008.
35. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 9, Moscow 1977, p348.
36. Quoted in G Zinoviev *History of the Bolshevik Party* London 1973, p123.
37. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 8, Moscow 1977, pp98-99.
38. L Trotsky *1905* Harmondsworth 1973, p249.
39. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 10, Moscow 1977, p152.
40. F Engels, ‘Preface to 1882 edition’ *Manifesto of the Communist Party* Moscow 1973, p11.
41. J Connolly *Selected writings* London 1988, p226.
42. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 11, Moscow 1977, p214.
43. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 10, pp152-53.
44. Quoted in G Zinoviev *History of the Bolshevik Party* London 1973, p127.
45. See J Riddle *Lenin’s struggle for a revolutionary International* New York 1984, pp23, 25, 33-37.