

# Their Democracy and Ours: the transformative potential of the workers' council

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This article is dedicated to the memory of Eoin MacVeigh, who came late in life to Marxism with the clarity and tenacity of one wholly convinced by its philosophy.

‘ a working class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour’ - Marx, *The Civil War in France*<sup>1</sup>

## Capitalism Is Again In Crisis

While capitalism and parliamentary democracy may appear to the atomised individual as the natural and fixed social order within which change can be achieved in the interest of wider society, recent global events have called into question any automatic acceptance that capitalism is the the only basis upon which society and economy can be organised<sup>2</sup>. The smug optimism of the proponents of the free market and all of its forces was laid bare by the credit crunch of 2008 and the deep economic crisis that followed. Banks and corporations have been bailed out to the tune of billions at the expense of the livelihoods of the majority of ordinary people and the public services they depend upon. In fact, what has emerged is a model of socialism for the rich and capitalism for the poor as states across the globe have intervened to prop up an ailing system in the interests of the elite financial and corporate class. In Ireland, the low and middle income sectors of the population are carrying the main burden of paying for

a banking crisis caused by a very small elite group. In the absence of wealth taxes or an increase in corporation taxes the result has been a rise in social deprivation and income inequality<sup>3</sup>.

It is now not possible to maintain that the parliamentary state stands above classes or is accountable to voters<sup>4</sup>. The contemporary state remains powerful and has continued, even in the face of abject corruption and crisis to act, in the words of Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, as the executive committee of the ruling class<sup>5</sup>.

However, while the limitations of capitalism have become obvious, what might not be so obvious is the alternative. Again, following Marx, an effective challenge to capitalism must be undertaken by a numerous group of people who have in common a shared interest in the common good, cooperation in the production of the necessities of life and the defeat of capitalism. However, the structures within which this group of people can organise must provide the potential for people to define, organise and participate in their own democracy and must also possess the power to defeat the system. The experience of more than a century of mass struggle does offer some clues.

In the perpetual striving of the left to integrate the vision and practice of a socialist society, the idea of workers' control and the workers' council has to occupy a special place. Its generalised application would satisfy one of the requirements for a socialist society, where decisions in relation to production would be in the hands of workers directly involved in production processes or the provision of services, within and between sectors and encompassed in participatory democratic structures that

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<sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Blackledge, 2013: 31

<sup>3</sup>Allen, 2012: 13

<sup>4</sup>Gluckstein, 2011: 32

<sup>5</sup>Marx, 2012: 37

have emerged from these very sites of production or service provision. The term ‘workers’ council’ embodies a form of worker organisation renewed at different times and across different geographical regions by groups of workers who are often unaware of this kind of structure or of historical precedents. Its most developed expression is the soviet, its simplest form the workplace representative committee. Yet workers independently adopt this committee based, delegate led, directly democratic structure, spontaneously generated because it immediately answers the organisational needs of grassroots struggle <sup>6</sup>.

What is evident from the history of workers’ councils is the emancipatory nature of workers control in transforming a situation of capitalist alienation into one of democratic practice. In this sense, it is important to distinguish between workers’ councils as collective worker organisations that challenge the hegemony of capitalist production, and workers’ cooperatives or other forms of self managed enterprises that exist within the capitalist logic of production and profitability. The latter are limited by the fact that they eventually to have bend to the rules of capitalism. Western European reform models advocate token worker input. To be truly emancipatory, councils need to actually transfer control to workers, otherwise traditional systems of hierarchy will be maintained. Not only is it necessary to complete the transfer of control to workers at all stages of the revolutionary process, but workers also need a system of organisation within which to coordinate their self management initiatives, within as well as between industrial sectors <sup>7</sup>.

## The Capacity of All Humans to Think and to Act

For more than one hundred years, workers have occupied factories and workplaces, they have formed and become engaged in workers’

councils and a variety of self managed enterprises in all parts of the world. Under all forms of political systems in all forms of industrial and agricultural sectors, workers have struggled to participate in the decision making structures of their workplaces. Workers have taken over enterprises that have been at risk of closure in times of economic crisis and have successfully managed to operate them as going concerns. Even workers that have previously had no experience of activism or political engagement have been able to occupy and become involved in the collective administration of their workplaces.

Prior to the development of capitalism, the concept of ‘workers control of the production process’ was not a demand - it was a simple fact of life for many peasants, small farmers and artisans. Workers’ control simply reflects the capacity of all humans to think as well as to do. It is not surprising then, that workers who have no particular socialist consciousness or political strategy on occasion take over and run productive enterprises as the faculties they draw upon are not so much new, as long suppressed under capitalism, for the majority of the population. It is the overcoming of this suppression that constitutes the explosive nature of workers’ councils <sup>8</sup>.

Throughout the history of capitalism, the workers’ council structure is continuously regenerated, from the Paris Commune to those of twenty first century Argentina <sup>9</sup>. Workers’ control has gone further and deeper during revolutionary periods than at any other times including (but not exclusively) Paris 1871, Russia 1917-18, Germany 1918-19, Italy 1920, Spain 1936-39, Hungary 1956, Chile 1970-73 and Portugal 1974-75. If workers’ councils have, under revolutionary conditions, demonstrated a potential core of viability, what can be learnt from a number of key historical examples that might inform their institutionalisation under stable conditions? What

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<sup>6</sup>Cohen, 2011: 48

<sup>7</sup>Wallis, 2011: 14

<sup>8</sup>Wallis, 2011: 10

<sup>9</sup>Cohen, 2011: 49

too are the lessons that can be applied to attempts to democratically organise the working class in resistance to the contemporary crisis?

## The Paris Commune 1871

The workers council that appeared during the Paris Commune in 1871 in the form of the National Guard Central Committee provides us with the first example of a collective organisation acquired by the working class, that had the potential to challenge capitalism. While the Parisian working class formed the majority of the capital's population, they worked in small units which limited the potential for mass and collective organisation. However, when the Prussian army mounted a siege of the city, the government armed workers who then constituted the majority of the 340,000 strong National Guard. The rank and file could exercise democratic control over elected officers through daily assemblies for drill. A central committee made up of delegates from the various military units provided the democratic structures for this mass movement, within which officers could be immediately recalled if they failed to represent the interests of those who elected them. While these structures were short lived, the uprising that followed in their wake forced what was left of the state to decamp to Versailles and launch a civil war. In this sense, in the form of the National Guard Central Committee a workers' council had triumphed over the capitalist state <sup>10</sup>.

While Marx described the Paris Commune as 'the political form at last discovered' <sup>11</sup>, Pannekoek writing in 1927 observed an interesting detail that made the Commune different from the workers' council:

In the Commune, the citizens and workers of Paris elected a parliament after the old model, but this parliament was immediately

transformed into something quite unlike our parliament. Its purpose was not to entertain the people with fine words while allowing a small clique of businessmen and capitalists to preserve their private property; the men who met in the new parliament had to publicly regulate and administer everything on behalf of the people. What had been a parliamentary corporation was transformed into a corporation of labor; it formed committees that were responsible for framing new legislation. In this manner, the bureaucracy as a special class, independent of and ruling over the people, disappeared, thereby abolishing the separation of legislative and executive powers. Those persons who occupied the highest posts over the people were at the same time elected by and representatives of the people themselves who put them in office, and could at any time be removed from office by their electors <sup>12</sup>.

In other words, the commune was elected as parliament based on the bourgeois political form, although it was transformed to a '*corporation of labor*'. The soviets ('soviet' is the Russian word for council) however, were established independently of the parliamentary system, representing the fighting proletariat as it emerged in Russia in 1905 and 1917 and which eventually took political control of the country and overcame the division between the political and the economic spheres:

In the council system, political organisation is built upon the economic process of labor. Parliamentarism rests upon the individual in his quality as a citizen

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<sup>10</sup>Gluckstein, 2006: 53

<sup>11</sup>Bonnet, 2013: 66

<sup>12</sup>Pannekoek, 1927: 10

of the State. This had its historical justification, since bourgeois society was originally composed of producers who were equal in respect to one another, each one of whom produced his commodities himself and together formed, through the sum of all their little transactions, the production process as a whole. But in modern society, with its giant industrial complexes and its class antagonisms, this basis is becoming increasingly obsolete <sup>13</sup>.

## The Russian Experience

Accounts by Marx and Lenin of the 1871 Paris Commune and the 1905 Petersburg Soviet point to a key dynamic in which workers' councils took over cities and factories challenging the capitalist state and creating a potential template for a new, worker run society organised along directly democratic and accountable lines <sup>14</sup>.

It was in Russia that the workers' council movement was to achieve its greatest success where the council (or the soviet) became the basis of a new state. The soviet, established in St Petersburg in 1905 arose in response to an objective need - the need for an organisation that would immediately involve hundreds of thousands of workers scattered across Russia, capable of self-control, that would be representative of the revolutionary undercurrents within the proletariat <sup>15</sup>. While Tsarism recovered temporarily and the soviet of 1905 was disbanded, World War 1 brought great suffering to the Russian people. When the war broke out, Russia was still a predominantly rural society, with the working class comprising only 10 of the 120 million population. Yet by 1917 the Russian capital, now renamed Petrograd, had become a great industrial centre, bearing all the features of de-

veloped capitalism. Between 1890 and 1914, the industrial workforce had trebled, growing again during the war so that by 1917 the city housed one eighth of the Russian working class <sup>16</sup>.

The amassing of workers in giant (mostly munition) factories, the absence of any sectional trade union organisation and the political intervention of the Bolsheviks paved the way for the final reckoning with Tsarism: a strike at the giant engineering works in Petrograd and a demand for bread led mostly by working class women led to confrontations with the military. When the army refused to fire on hungry striking workers in Petrograd in February 1917, there were no obstacles to the mass re-creation of the soviets. Literally, within twenty four hours the Petrograd soviet was re-established, based on work place delegates where, from the start, collective power in the workplace was fused with the physical power of armed men.

This organisation confronted a capitalist warmongering state in almost total disarray. As the continuing war and deepening social crisis took its toll, the Bolsheviks gained more and more influence within the soviets - winning a majority in September - until, through an almost bloodless insurrection in late October, the Military Council of the Petrograd Soviet took control of the Winter Palace, ousted the Kerensky government and transferred all power to the soviets. This evolution, where the soviet system formed the basis of a new socialist state, marks the difference between Russia and other examples. Russian workers' councils were strong enough to constitute a state power in their own right. Tragically, workers' power in Russia was short lived succumbing to the Stalinist counter-revolution in the twenties; however, from the Russian experience we have learnt the importance of organisational structures that can challenge the power of the state, demonstrating the potential to become, through the revolutionary pro-

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<sup>13</sup>ibid

<sup>14</sup>Cohen, 2013: 49

<sup>15</sup>Gluckstein, 2011: 41

<sup>16</sup>Gluckstein, 1985: 18

cess, enduring organs of working class representation The working class needs to smash the existing state apparatus rather than simply taking it over - the soviets (or workers' councils) that emerged in the course of the Russian Revolution in 1917 were the embryo of the new workers' state apparatus <sup>17</sup>.



The Petrograd Soviet

## World War 1 and Its Aftermath

The 'giant industrial complexes and their class antagonisms' that Pannekoek referred to were the munitions and arms industries that emerged during the First World War providing a hot bed for the development of workers' councils on a broader scale. The huge expansion of employment in the munitions industries (135 percent in Russia, 34 percent in Britain, and 44 percent in Germany) and the organisation of workers in workplace units offered them unprecedented bargaining power, if they were organised <sup>18</sup>. Abandoned by their trade union officials, workers in industrial centres across Petrograd, Glasgow, Berlin and Turin organised into their own structures where rank and file representatives were elected and committees formed. These electoral units formed the basis for instant recall and democracy and while not necessarily choosing the road to insurrection and workers' power, the first steps had been taken.

However, a key development was yet to

take place: where work based shop steward committees confined themselves to economic demands and the individual workplace, they were no more than temporary substitutes for the trade union. The war challenged an important ideological prop of capitalism - the distinction between the economic and the political. Struggles over pay and conditions are mounted in the economic sphere but do not challenge the state. Official politics does not deal with capitalist/worker relations so any debates that take place do so on ruling class terms. Herein lies the potential of the workers' council to bridge the divide between the political and economic spheres, the separation which is a fundamental characteristic of the capitalist state <sup>19</sup>.

Reflecting on his experiences in Turin during the 'two red years' (1919-20) that followed the first world war, Gramsci noted the potential of the workers' council to harness the immense social forces unleashed by the war and to provide a route towards a socialist society:

the socialist state already exists potentially in the institutions of social life characteristic of the exploited working class... the workshop with its internal commissions [shop stewards committees] <sup>20</sup>.

During these two years, a factory council movement that reached its high point in Turin unmistakably demonstrated the possibility, though not the reality, of workers' power. This movement, originally based in the shop floor commissions established by the official trade union, was taken over by insurgent workers showing the same pattern of direct democracy. These commissions developed into the factory council system and spread beyond the engineering sector so that by 1920 in Turin, 'without any preparation whatsoever, the factory councils were able to

<sup>17</sup>Molyneux, 2012: 59

<sup>18</sup>Gluckstein, 1985: 47

<sup>19</sup>Bonnet, 2011: 72

<sup>20</sup>Gramsci, 1977: 65

<sup>21</sup>Gramsci, 1977: 318

mobilise 120,000 workers, called out factory by factory, in the course of just one hour' <sup>21</sup>.

Workers' ability to act independently of trade union officials that characterised the emergence of workers' councils across Europe proved highly disturbing to the ruling class. The German workers' council movement was preceded in 1917 by a wave of unofficial strikes that suddenly swept through the country. The workers' councils that sprang up a year later were, according to Gluckstein, 'the front line in a workers' offensive which the traditional forces of labour were unwilling to lead' <sup>22</sup>. During a sailors mutiny in Germany in 1918, sailors elected delegates ship by ship, who then formed a council, boldly nudging the vanguard workers into action <sup>23</sup>.

But if these independent structures disturbed the ruling class and the reformist trade union leaders, it was because they spontaneously emerged in an unpremeditated way in response to the concrete needs of workers, which in turn reflected the needs of wider society, for what is society if it is not a collective of workers who are the very substance of the productive process.

As Gramsci noted:

the leaders themselves spoke of the 'spontaneity' of the movement, and rightly so. This assertion was a stimulus, a tonic, an element of unification in depth; above all it denied that the movement was arbitrary, a cooked-up venture, and stressed its historical necessity. It gave the masses a 'theoretical' consciousness of being creators of historical and institutional values, of being founders of a state. This unity between 'spontaneity' and 'conscious leadership' or 'discipline' is precisely the real political action

of the subaltern classes, in so far as this is mass politics and not merely an adventure by groups claiming to represent the masses <sup>24</sup>.

## The Transformative Potential of the Workers' Council

In many struggles that have given rise to workers' councils in the last century, this element of spontaneity continually resurfaces, showing that workers independently and repeatedly learn and put into practice class-based lessons. The political crisis in Chile in the early 1970s saw 'spontaneous and unorganised acts of resistance by the working class'<sup>25</sup>, and the workers uprising of 2000 - 2001 in Argentina was not centrally planned. But the spontaneous emergence of workers' councils as structures of direct democracy, self-activity and class independence do not arise out of thin air; rather they are born out of a shared experience of the capitalist labour process, which shapes unity and solidarity, the two elements of the labour struggle that carry the seeds of social transformation: self-directed action and solidarity <sup>26</sup>.

Trade unions established in the early to mid twentieth century have largely operated through the institutional frameworks of capitalism and have dominated labour history. However, while a great step forward for working people, trade unions have existed to negotiate with employers within capitalism, not to overthrow them. Strikes, if conducted, tend to be economic in nature, concerning workers pay and conditions rather than escalating into a political challenge <sup>27</sup>.

Workers' control points to more than just a new way of organising production processes - it is also the release of human capacities and creativities on a vast scale. Workers' Councils

<sup>22</sup>Gluckstein, 1985: 106

<sup>23</sup>Kuhn, 2012: 9

<sup>24</sup>Gramsci, 1971: 198

<sup>25</sup>Gonzalez, 1987: 64. Cited in Cohen 2011.

<sup>26</sup>Cohen, 2011: 55

<sup>27</sup>Gluckstein, 2011: 33

present us with a form to build upon in the transition to a socialist society. It is no accident that they have had most currency during periods of revolution and have failed, not because of inherent issues with their structures or constitution or a loss of momentum, but rather the threat or use of armed force <sup>28</sup>. However, the very potential strength of the workers' council - its representative nature - can also be its very weakness. If the majority of workers are not convinced of the need to radically challenge and overthrow the capitalist state, the workers' councils will ultimately be broken by it <sup>29</sup>.

As mentioned earlier, a fundamental characteristic of the workers' council is its instinctive directly democratic features. Unlike the so called representative democracy purveyed by conventional political and trade union electoral processes, it is a form of democratic decision-making that immediately holds delegates accountable if they do not represent and hold to the decisions of the majority they were elected by. These democratic features have been evident in even the earliest forms of resistance to capitalism, such as the British workers fight of 1830 and 1840, or across States and sectors in the great upheaval in the US during the 1870s <sup>30</sup>.

The germs of a workers' council can be found where ever labour organises. The very nature of the workers' council becomes explosive and full of revolutionary potential as the whole of the capitalist system of control over the forces of production comes into question. The very independence of workers' councils, their spontaneity and inherent tendency to direct democracy, their ability to effectively challenge and defeat the capitalist state engenders them with massive potential to transform, not just the individual worker who is emancipated as her/his creative faculties are unleashed, but the very structures through which society is organised.

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<sup>28</sup>Wallis, 2011: 13

<sup>29</sup>Gluckstein, 2011: 39

<sup>30</sup>Cohen, 2011: 49

<sup>31</sup>Jack O'Connors speech at the SIPTU 2013 Conference.

## Lessons for the Contemporary Struggle

The lesson from the European experiences of workers' control and workers' councils in the early twentieth century has been that workers' councils have the potential to provide the basis for a new kind of society by abolishing the capitalist state and transferring democratic control to workers: through instant recall and in the absence of any special privileges, delegates remain directly and immediately responsible to those who have elected them. This type of democracy calls into question the sham democracy of parliamentary elections under capitalism. Under capitalism, power is held by the financial and corporate elite, and the politicians who support and further their interests. The masses, grouped together by an accident of geography, mark 'X' on a ballot paper, which really represents the transfer of power to a privileged elite for the years before the next election, when the cycle will inevitably repeat. Experience has shown that socialists need to participate in and make use of parliamentary elections but also that such elections do not offer a means of bringing about fundamental change.

The tendency for workers' councils to develop spontaneously means that structures redolent of workers' councils can emerge even within the neo-liberal capitalist model. These structures can provide a synthesis between the economic and political struggle that traditional trade union structures do not provide and which is aspired to in the many campaigns and movements resisting current austerity and crisis. While participation in existing trade unions remains essential, the need for independent structures of organisation, mobilisation and democracy, outside of the traditional forms of conventional political or trade union bureaucracy, control or electoral processes has never been more urgent.

When Jack O'Connor describes Labour as

‘batting at the gates of hell<sup>31</sup>’ while SIPTU forces four ballots on bus workers in an attempt to smash their militant resolve, a reliance on trade union officials as the leaders of worker organisation and action must be questioned and new forms of potential organisation must be probed.

In the wake of the first phase of the resistance to Household and Property Taxes, questions of where to now for the Left and the movement of resistance in Ireland abound. The spectre of demoralisation lingers over the landscape of the resistance movement, but in its shadow hangs an appetite for change and in the contemporary social, political and economic climate it is couched in the language and ideas of revolution. As such, and as Davidson argues, a reassessment of the conditions under which we have to fight are now in order <sup>32</sup>. This may also necessitate a rethink of how we organise. The lessons from the workers’ councils demonstrate the need to organise at the grass roots level in democratic systems that are truly representative of the working class and that facilitate speedy

mobilisation when necessary. Within these structures the role of the revolutionary party is essential to achieve a synthesis between the social, political and economic arguments.

It is these potentialities that can be transferred to any such organisational structures, be they within workplaces, within industrial sectors or within grass roots campaigns. While not within the scope of this article, an analysis of the extent to which the organisational structures of the national Campaign Against Home and Water Taxes approached a model for direct democracy, which should include an honest critique and suggestions for improvement, would be welcome.

Any system of organisation that can emulate the spontaneity, direct democracy and independence of the workers’ councils while presenting a real challenge to capitalism by overcoming the divide between the economic and political struggle must present a real threat to the ruling class and as such a great potential to transform the individual, the class and society.

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<sup>32</sup>2013: 177

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