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Revolutionary Socialism and Industrial Unrest in the Era of the Winnipeg General Strike:

The Origins of Communist Labour Unionism in Europe and North America

Larry Peterson

A REMARKABLE CHANGE OVERCAME the international workers' movement after 1920. Before that date, and especially during the industrial struggles and revolutionary movements between 1917 and 1920, workers' radicalism was characterized by great diversity, in terms of organization, ideology, and politics. This was an era of great experimentation and of imaginative innovation in the workers' movement. Old forms of organization were discarded in favour of ones adapted to the new level of industrial militancy and revolutionaries redefined their goals and introduced a new range of organizational means and political weapons to achieve them. After 1920, however, this radicalism became more and more concentrated in one organization — the Communist International. Indeed, communist hegemony over left-wing radicalism became so great that by the 1930s and 1940s, when many of the issues of 1917-20 were once more on the agenda, there were few if any alternatives to communism among revolutionary socialists. At times splinter groups, sects, or individuals survived, claiming to carry on the legacy of the years 1917-20, but they rarely could be taken seriously, at least in organizational or practical terms, and they appeared increasingly irrelevant to workers' struggles as relics of the past. In short, the diversity of the years 1917-20 had been replaced by the unity of a single revolutionary movement.

Nowhere was this change more evident than in industrial struggles and labour union organizations. The industrial struggles before 1920 had given rise to a proliferation of groups and movements — shop stewards, shop commit-

L. Peterson, "Revolutionary Socialism and Industrial Unrest in the Era of the Winnipeg General Strike: The Origins of Communist Labour Unionism in Europe and North America," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984), 115-131.

tees, works councils, industrial unions, the One Big Union, unified party-union organizations — each one adapted to the specific conditions of the industries and countries where they were born. They brought new groups of workers into the organized workers' movement; drastically altered the relationship between workers' parties and labour unions; raised industrial struggle to a new level of importance; and forced revolutionary socialists to revise and redefine their tactics for overthrowing the capitalist state. Nevertheless, by the beginning of World War II Communists so dominated the left wing of labour unions and industrial movements that these earlier industrial movements were all but forgotten. They were not rediscovered until over a generation later, when radicals in the 1960s and 1970s became interested in alternative traditions in the history of the workers' movement that preceded the founding of the Communist International. Indeed, from the 1920s to the 1950s, Marxian socialist concepts of labour unionism and revolutionary tactics in industrial struggles were all but synonymous with the policies and organization of the Communist Party.

How did this drastic change come about? What, in light of the rich experience of workers and the wealth of industrial movements, ideologies, and organizations between 1917 and 1920, predisposed the left wing of the workers' movement in Europe and North America to the later hegemony of the Communist Party? I would argue that the answer is to be found to a great extent in the industrial struggles of the period 1917-20 themselves. The experiences of both industrial militants and revolutionary socialists at the end of World War I led them, in different ways, to a re-evaluation of their tactics, goals, ideologies, and organizations, and this re-evaluation resulted in a new synthesis of politics and economics — of revolutionary socialism and industrial struggles — within the Communist International. This synthesis grew out of both the failures and successes of the industrial movements of the years 1917-20. From the failures came the critical reconsideration of economic tactics by industrial militants. From the successes came the new, more positive attitude of revolutionary socialists toward industrial struggle. Starting from widely differing positions, these two sides of the workers' movement converged in the course of the struggles of these years. In the following analysis, I will briefly examine the two sides of this equation, before discussing why the Communist International became the focal point of the new revolutionary synthesis after 1920.

There can be no doubt that revolutionary labour unionists and industrial militants drastically re-evaluated their concepts of revolution and industrial struggle after 1920. The leading lights of communist labour unionism in the 1920s read like a list of pre-1920 industrial militants. In Germany, Gustav Sobottka, one of the three commissars sent into the Soviet Occupation Zone in 1945 to secure communist control of East Germany, started out in the Ruhr as the leader of coal miners in the quasi-syndicalist *Freie Arbeiter-Union*. In France, Gaston Monmousseau and the leaders of the *Confédération Générale*

du Travail Unitaire (CGTU) came from the most militant and previously anti-political wing of the syndicalist movement. In Italy, the Communist Party quickly came under the leadership of the theorists of the factory councils movement in Turin, people like Gramsci, Togliatti, and their collaborators on the journal *L'Ordine nuovo*. Many of the early leaders of the Communist Party of Great Britain — men like Willie Gallacher, Jack Murphy, Tom Bell, Arthur MacManus, and Harry Pollitt — had risen to prominence in the labour unions and in the shop stewards' movement of World War I, while in North America William Z. Foster made a comparable transition from syndicalism to communism. In both Canada and the United States many Communist leaders received their initiation in revolutionary unionism in the One Big Union (OBU) and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) before joining the Communist Party. [1]

What all these leaders faced around 1920 was either the arrest, stagnation, or outright failure of the industrial movements they represented. For example, syndicalism permanently lost its credibility as a revolutionary movement after the string of failures of syndicalist-led strikes in the years 1918-20. Syndicalism had already been eclipsed in Britain by the wartime shop stewards' movement, but the crucial defeats came later in the general strike of Ruhr miners in early 1919, the defeat of the steelworkers' strike in the United States, also in 1919, and above all the collapse of the General Strike in France in May 1920 (which followed upon earlier strike failures the previous year). The works councils' and shop stewards' movements fared no better. In Great Britain

[1] *Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung: Biographisches Lexicon* (Berlin 1970), 434-5; Dietrich Staritz, *Sozialismus in einem halben Land: Zur Programmatik und Politik der KPD/SED in der Phase der antifaschistisch-demokratischen Umwälzung in der DDR* (Berlin 1976), 27-35; Larry Peterson, "The Policies and Work of the KPD in the Free Labor Unions of Rhineland-Westphalia 1920-1924," Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, 1978; Robert Wohl, *French Communism in the Making, 1914-1924* (Stanford 1966); John A Cammett, *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism* (Stanford 1967); James Hinton and Richard Hyman, *Trade Unions and Revolution: The Industrial Policies of the Early British Communist Party* (London 1975); L.J. MacFarlane, *The British Communist Party: Its Origins and Development until 1929* (London 1966); Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-1921: The Origins of British Communism* (London 1969); Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict That Shaped American Unions* (Princeton 1977), 20 ff.; William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: A History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1919-1929* (Toronto 1968), 3-63, 162-7; Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada: A History* (Toronto 1975), 1-53; David Frank, "Class Conflict in the Coal Industry: Cape Breton 1922," in Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto 1976), 161-84; David J. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto 1978), 219-28, 234-45; Norman Penner, *The Canadian Left: A Critical Analysis* (Scarborough 1977), 124 ff. In Canada many CPC leaders in the west came from the OBU, and the militant leader of the mineworkers in Nova Scotia was also a Communist. The Ontario-based national leadership had fewer ties with the OBU type of industrial radicalism, but they too often came from a background of industrial militancy.

the shop stewards' movement was quickly contained once the immediate economic pressures of the war were removed; the labour unions re-established their leadership in negotiations with employers and the state over reconversion to peacetime production; and post-war unemployment dampened rank-and-file militancy and undermined the effectiveness of industrial action. In Germany, the *revolutionäre Obleute* (the revolutionary shop stewards of Berlin and other industrial cities) and the revolutionary works councils that grew out of the strike waves of 1918 and 1919 were decisively defeated during the military suppression of the German revolution. And in Italy the factory councils' movement of the northern industrial cities was just as decisively defeated in the general strike and factory occupations of the spring and fall of 1920. Finally, one big unionism, as a road to workers' power and revolution, proved itself incapable of meeting the determined resistance of a capitalist state. In Canada employers and the state crushed the OBU before it could even consolidate its organization; in the United States the state used police repression, consisting of mass arrests, imprisonment, and deportations, to destroy the IWW; in Germany the *Arbeiter-Unionen* succeeded in hanging on a little longer because of the political and economic instability caused by military defeat and inflationary crisis, but there too the *Arbeiter-Unionen* succumbed by 1924 to the combined forces of employers, state intervention, *Schutzpolizei*, and military repression.[2]

It cannot be emphasized enough that these defeats were decisive. They were physical, material defeats, often enough at the end of a rifle barrel or with the armed forces of the state clearly visible in the background. They forced upon

[2] Branko Pribićević, *The Shop Stewards' Movement and Workers' Control 1910-1922* (Oxford 1959); James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards' Movement* (London 1973); Erhard Lucas, "Ursachen und Verlauf der Bergarbeiterbewegung in Hamborn und im westlichen Ruhrgebiet 1918/19: Zum Syndikalismus in der Novemberrevolution," *Duisburger Forschungen*, 15 (Duisburg 1971), 1-119; Erhard Lucas, *Zwei Formen von Radikalismus in der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* (Frankfurt a.M. 1976); Hans Manfred Bock, *Syndikalismus und Linkskommunismus: Zur Geschichte und Soziologie der Freien Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands (Syndikalisten), der Allgemeinen Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands und der Kommunistischen Arbeiter-Partei Deutschlands* (Meisenheim am Glan 1969), 153-87; Peter von Oertzen, *Betriebsräte in der Novemberrevolution: Eine politikwissenschaftliche Untersuchung über Ideengehalt und Struktur der betrieblichen und wirtschaftlichen Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Revolution* (Düsseldorf 1963); Heinz Habedank, *Um Mitbestimmung und Nationalisierung während der Novemberrevolution und im Frühjahr 1919* (Berlin 1967); Annie Kriegel, *Aux origines du communisme français 1914-1920: Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement ouvrier français* (Paris 1964), 359-547; Wohl, *French Communism, passim;* Paolo Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories: Italy 1920*, trans. Gwyn A. Williams (London 1975); David J. Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations, and the General Strike* (Montreal 1974); Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men;* Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (New York 1969); William Preston, *Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Repression of Radicals, 1903-1933* (Cambridge MA 1963), 118-237.

industrial militants a new, unavoidable awareness of the power of the capitalist state. Employers were often thrown on the defensive or temporarily defeated in the first flush of industrial action or a general strike, only to emerge triumphant when backed by the full economic, political, and — when necessary — military power of the state. In the two decades prior to 1920, workers had come to realize the potential force of industrial action. The leaders of the new industrial movements came to rely on their industrial organizations and tactics, and they frequently criticized Marxian socialists for their obsession with politics and their insistence on the need to overthrow the capitalist state. The experiences of 1919 and 1920, when they directly confronted that state, brought home the point that they, too, needed some kind of *political* strategy to achieve their goals. Industrial organization, militant strike tactics, and economic strength were simply not enough.[3]

Nevertheless, out of their experiences in the years 1917-20 industrial militants developed a new range of organizational concepts and economic tactics, despite the overall failure of industrial action to achieve its goals. In particular, the industrial movements of this period showed incontrovertibly the importance and potential strength of industrial action for a revolutionary movement. Nowhere had workers moved so massively as in their industrial actions; nowhere had they so successfully organized themselves as a class; nowhere had they been so susceptible to socialist leadership and ideas; and nowhere had they come so close to throwing their united strength behind a movement that could have potentially culminated in the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system. Few Marxian socialists before 1914 would have foreseen the emergence of such industrial movements in the forms they took. (Rosa Luxemburg was very much the exception.) Not many more understood their potential when they could no longer be ignored after 1917. But the persistence and the strengths of the industrial movements eventually forced revolutionary socialists to re-evaluate their own concepts concerning political parties, labour unions, and industrial action.[4]

Revolutionary socialists played such diffuse and varied roles in the industrial movements of this period that it would be difficult to give a short summary. In some countries socialist parties provided much of the leadership of rank-and-file movements. This was the case in Britain and Canada where members of the Socialist Labor Party and Socialist Party of Canada, respec-

[3] The reversal of position was most striking among syndicalists, for they had been most extreme in opposing political parties before 1920. For the case of France, which is representative of this change in attitude, see Wohl, *French Communism*.

[4] For the exceptions see Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions;* Karl Kautsky, *Der Weg zur Macht*, Georg Fülberth, ed. (Frankfurt a.M. 1972); Carl Reeve, *The Life and Times of Daniel DeLeon* (New York 1972); C. Desmond Greaves, *The Life and Times of James Connolly* (London 1961); A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement 1899-1919* (Toronto 1977).

tively, played important roles in the shop stewards' movement and the One Big Union, despite their parties' extremely small size and lack of a mass political following. Other socialist parties in Britain and Canada, however, played no such role and limited themselves to political agitation and propaganda. In the United States, on the other hand, the socialist and industrial movements tended to develop separately, in hostility to each other nationally though with closer ties on the rank-and-file level. In France opposition to World War I brought many syndicalists and left-wing socialists together, but the socialists concentrated on political organization and left economic action to the labour unionists, who only rarely belonged to and even more rarely participated in the Socialist Party. In Italy industrial action brought together a group of Socialist Party intellectuals with rank-and-file workers in the factories, but here, too, the socialists played little direct role in industrial actions, concentrating instead on defending the industrial militants and theorizing about their methods in party journals and conferences. The role of socialists in industrial actions was most diverse of all in Germany. There virtually all industrial militants considered themselves socialists, and often acted as political as well as industrial leaders of workers. But the Social Democratic Party had broken down into so many factions and splinter groups that there was an endless variation of opinions among socialists on the role of industrial action, political parties, and the relationship of parties to unions. In short, after 1917 there was no consensus, even or especially among Marxists, on the role of industrial action and labour unions in the revolutionary socialist movement. Each group of socialists groped, within national conditions and under the pressure of events, toward their own solution to the problem.[3]

In this groping two points were nevertheless clear. First, the conventional Marxism of the Second International, which stressed parliamentary politics and relegated labour unions to a secondary role in the revolutionary movement as

[3] In addition to the works cited in notes 1 and 2, see Kathryn Amdur, "Unity and Schism in French Labor Politics: Limoges and Saint-Etienne, 1914-1922," Ph.D. thesis, Stanford University, 1978; Gerald Friesen, " 'Yours in Revolt': Regionalism, Socialism and the Western Canadian Labour Movement," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 1 (1976), 139-57; Giuseppe Fiori, *Antonio Gramsci: Life of a Revolutionary* (New York 1971); David W. Morgan, *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution: A History of the German Independent Social Democratic Party, 1917-1922* (Ithaca 1975); Mary Nolan, *Social Democracy and Society: Working-class Radicalism in Düsseldorf, 1890-1920* (Cambridge 1981), 227-300; Erwin Könneman and Hans-Joachim Krusch, *Aktionseinheit contra Kapp-Pusch* (Berlin 1972); Erhard Lucas, *Märzrevolution 1920*, 2 vols., (Frankfurt a.M. 1973-74); Reinhard Rürup, ed., *Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte im rheinisch-westfälischen Industriegebiet: Studien zur Geschichte der Revolution 1918/1919* (Wuppertal 1975); Larry Peterson, "The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism 1900-1925," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (1981), 41-66 (reprinted in revised form in James E. Cronin and Carmen Sirianni, eds., *Work, Community, and Power: The Experience of Labor in Europe and America, 1900-1925* [Philadelphia 1983], 49-87).

"schools of socialism," was no longer tenable. Marxists could no longer play down the political value of strikes nor dismiss the unions' concern with immediate demands and reforms, not at a time when industrial actions and industrial unions were mobilizing the mass of workers in direct confrontation with employers and the state. Second, the primarily political strategies of Marxist parties were meeting as many failures and defeats as the primarily economic strategies of industrial militants. The traditional emphasis on propaganda and agitation in the socialist parties of the Anglo-Saxon countries had failed to achieve the desired breakthrough among workers. The parliamentarianism of French socialism had created a party dominated by petty bourgeois intellectuals, school teachers, and low level government bureaucrats, while revolutionary workers tended to join the labour unions instead. None of the movements of left-wing social democrats that grew out of the war — the *minoritaires* in France, the Independent Social Democrats in Germany, and the maximalist wing of the Italian Socialist Party — succeeded in developing a new revolutionary strategy or in revitalizing the socialist movement. They all became quickly stuck in the mud of sterile opposition and immobile negativism. In Germany, the persistent lure of left-wing insurrectionism in reaction to such immobility, whether in the form of the Spartacist League, the Communist Party, the Communist Workers' Party, or the left wing of the Independent Social Democrats, led repeatedly to crushing defeats as each of these groups of workers rushed to overthrow the state without the preparation, organization, strategy, or mass support needed to succeed. Obviously, if revolutionary socialists were to succeed, something had to be done to bring politically conscious socialists and the mass of workers together, and the industrial actions of workers seemed to provide the answer.[6]

Revolutionary socialists found the key to uniting political struggle with the economic militancy of workers in the structure of the industrial movements. For, although these movements failed to achieve their main objectives, they created a variety of means of action and organization that could mesh nicely with the political activity of socialists, both complementing the work of socialists and creating a new relationship between economic and political forms of struggle. Prior to 1914, socialists viewed the political and economic organizations of workers as separate and autonomous units in the workers' movement. At best, they were united in a personal union in which labour leaders supported the Socialist Party and party leaders belonged to the labour unions. In many countries, however, the ties did not go even this far.[7] As for

[6] For the problems of left-wing social democrats, see Albert S. Lindemann, *The 'Red Years': European Socialism versus Bolshevism, 1919-1921* (Berkeley 1974); on Germany see Ossip K. Flechtheim, *Die KPD in der Weimarer Republik*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt a.M. 1969); and Eberhard Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik 1918-1919* (Düsseldorf 1962), in addition to works previously cited in notes 1 and 2.

[7] German social democracy is the classic case of party/union relations before 1914. Starting from a dominating position over the unions in 1890, the German Social Democ-

the new industrial movements, in their early days they were largely spontaneous, depending on *ad hoc* leadership drawn from local workers or union organizers who moved from one trouble spot to another.[8] But as the industrial movements grew in terms of experience and organization, they created a new stratum of rank-and-file militants. These militants were not rigidly loyal to a national organization or established as functionaries separate from the workplace, as was the case with craft union leaders, but were instead linked closely with the mass of workers through a flexible if rudimentary organization based on the workplace. It was this organization of rank-and-file militants, backed locally by the mass of industrial workers, that proved to be so formidable in the mass movements between 1917 and 1920. And it was this same rank-and-file organization that provided revolutionary socialists with the opportunity to establish links with and enter into the industrial movements. For working-class socialists quite naturally gravitated toward the rank-and-file movements in the course of industrial struggles, often becoming militant leaders of the economic movement, while rank-and-file industrialist unionists just as naturally gravitated toward an alliance with radical political organizers the more they confronted the coercive forces of employers and the state. The result was a complex, fluid set of interrelationships between revolutionary socialists, rank-and-file militants, and the mass of industrial workers. Many of the industrial movements between 1917 and 1920 could quite rightly be called revolutionary or potentially revolutionary precisely because of these interrelationships. The combination of political revolutionaries with a Marxian socialist consciousness, of rank-and-file militants with economic demands that directly or indirectly contested capitalist control of industry, and of discontented workers created a social movement of historic dimensions that went well beyond the limited consciousness or intention of any individual members. Hence the tendency of such industrial movements to produce politically radical leaders, even in countries like Britain, Canada, and the United States where the mass of workers was never explicitly socialist or revolutionary in consciousness. The mixture was indeed explosive, and it forced capitalists, workers, and socialists all to rethink their positions. In particular, many of those revolutionary socialists who were to found the Communist International in 1919 and 1920 used the lessons they had learned in the industrial struggles of the years 1917-20 to

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ratic Party gradually toned down its emphasis on the primacy of politics and came to accept the unions as equal and autonomous organizations within the workers' movement. See Carl E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy 1905-1917: The Development of the Great Schism* (Cambridge MA 1955); W.L. Guttsman, *The German Social Democratic Party 1875-1933* (London 1981); and Gary P. Steenson, *"Not One Man! Not One Penny!" German Social Democracy, 1863-1914* (Pittsburgh 1981), esp. 79-110. In other countries, however, links between socialist parties and labour unions were much more tenuous and sporadic.

[8] The IWW is a typical case of this type of *ad hoc* organization.

revise the Marxist view of the proletarian revolutionary movement.[9]

The uniqueness of the Communist International, and one of the key secrets of its success in establishing its hegemony over the revolutionary left, lay in its ability to reinterpret radically the Marxist view of economic struggles, to devise a programme and organization to translate this new view into practice, and thereby to attract and incorporate into the communist movement the most dynamic elements of the industrial movements from before 1920. As two historians of the British workers' movement, James Hinton and Richard Hyman, have argued, the novelty of the Communists was their "emphasis on the politics of industrial struggle."[10] The lyricism of Rosa Luxemburg's evocative, but not very concrete, advocacy of the mass strike gave way to the hard-nosed realism of veterans of industrial struggle. Other historians, in particular Robert Wohl, have argued that syndicalists and other industrial activists turned to the Comintern after 1920 because they were searching for a new strategy after the failure of their own industrial approach to revolution.[11] I would agree that this is indeed a large part of the story. The Comintern was so attractive to them, however, not just because the success of the Bolshevik revolution offered them an alternative, not just because the Communists recognized the need to overthrow the capitalist state, but also because the Comintern incorporated much of the programme of the industrial militants into the communist approach to revolution. The early history of the Communist International and the Red International of Labor Unions, when the Communists formulated their programme, organization, strategy, and tactics, was decisively influenced by the experience of industrial action between 1917 and 1920. And, by participating in the formation of the Third International — a participation actively encouraged by the Bolsheviks — industrial militants saw to it that key elements of their approach to industrial action and revolution were accepted as integral parts of the Communist programme.[12]

[9] Cf. the definition of a revolutionary movement given by Hinton and Hyman, *Trade Unions and Revolution*, 50: "The revolutionary movement, properly so called, consists of those who form the stratum of authentic leaders of working-class militancy — men and women themselves committed to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism who can command a rank-and-file following in mass industrial or political action. No one, of course, is seeking to infer the attitudes of this rank-and-file from the attitudes of its leaders. . . . The 'revolutionary movement' describes a developing relationship between committed revolutionary leaders and 'spontaneous' rank-and-file militancy. It describes the stratum of revolutionaries *in their relationship with* mass activity. Organize this vanguard into a united revolutionary party, internally constructed on democratic centralist lines, and you have the ideal type of the Leninist party." (Emphasis in the original.)

[10] *Ibid.*, 10.

[11] Wohl, *French Communism*, 433-54.

[12] That the Comintern incorporated industrial action into its programme and organization is indisputable. However, there has been no systematic study of the Comintern's industrial policies. Although there is a growing body of works on communism and labour unions on the national level, there is no comparative study of this aspect of

Most important, as mentioned earlier, was the acceptance by Marxists, for the first time, of an *industrial* component in their strategy for revolution. This was a key difference from the Marxism of the Second International, one that cannot be overemphasized. It comprised a whole series of specific tactics and positions, of which the most important were: 1) an uncompromising position in favour of industrial unionism; 2) the organization of both party and unions based on factory units; 3) emphasis on rank-and-file action; 4) the encouragement of various kinds of extra-union factory councils, rank-and-file committees, and shop stewards' groups; and 5) the active exploitation of industrial unrest for the achievement of both short- and long-term political goals. Specifically, the Communists advocated a wide range of militant tactics in industrial movements. They favoured freedom of action, viewing industrial movements as part of the class struggle, not limited by contracts or formal negotiations; hence they included wildcat strikes and unofficial stoppages as important tactical weapons. They also favoured unity of action — industrially within the factory, among different political groups around economic issues, and between workers in different industries — and to achieve such unity they advocated use of the sympathetic strike, the expansion of local strike movements to other areas and industries, and the creation of industrial alliances among key groups of workers (especially in transport, mining, and metallurgy). The Communists sought to balance the autonomy of local unions with central organization and coordination, favouring especially freedom of action in dealing with economic and shopfloor issues of immediate concern to workers, while trying to direct such actions to feed into a national or international political strategy. They encouraged mass participation in industrial movements through such means as factory and mine assemblies and mass picketing. Finally, the Communists

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international communism. There is also no work available on the Red International of Labor Unions (RILU), largely because it is assumed that this body was merely a puppet of the Comintern. I would question this blanket assumption, if only because there are numerous known instances when the Comintern leadership accommodated its tactics or organization to industrial activists it had attracted to the Comintern or RILU. The RILU played some role in this, although exactly what this role was cannot be fully assessed until the RILU is more thoroughly studied. Even for the Comintern, relatively little attention has been paid to its industrial policies in the early 1920s. Most studies have concentrated on the political history of the Comintern and, at most, mention industrial or union policies in a quick survey of secondary questions, again assuming that such policies were indeed secondary. Of course, most historians in the west have been preoccupied with showing Russian domination over the communist movement. Assumptions about the role of industrial action or union policies in the communist movement should be seen in this light, since recognition of indigenous industrial activism that might have affected the Comintern would tend to modify theses about the omnipotence of the Russians. For an exception to most studies, see David F. Calhoun, *The United Front: The TUC and the Russians 1923-1928* (Cambridge 1976). For the RILU, see G.M. Adebikow, *Die Rote Gewerkschaftsinternationale: Grundriss der Geschichte der RGI* (Berlin 1973).

advanced a wide range of demands that went well beyond the narrow economic issues of "bread and butter" unionism, from immediate economic demands over wages and hours, to issues of workplace rules and industrial control, to explicitly political questions. In all of this, the Communists sought to support industrial movements that would carry workers beyond the mere regulation of wage labour under capitalist limits, even as they kept in mind the need for immediate economic reforms.

Moreover, the Comintern cultivated the growth of *workers'* parties under *workers'* leadership, thereby overcoming the objections of many industrial militants towards the domination of social democratic parties by intellectuals of bourgeois origins. Hinton and Hyman make this point very clear for Great Britain, but it was of even greater importance in countries like France and Germany. "Above all," they write, "the Party should be viewed as an attempt to bring together and organize effectively the new stratum of working class 'rank-and-file' leadership thrown up by the industrial upheavals of the 1910-20 decade."[13]

Finally, the Comintern radically redefined the relationship between the party and the labour unions. This involved changing both the relative weight of the two organizations and the structure of their interrelationship. On the one hand, the Communist Party insisted on the leading role of the party over the unions, thus rejecting the organizational autonomy and equality of unions under the Second International. The party became the decisive and dominating force. On the other hand, the Communists attempted to incorporate the rank-and-file leaders of the industrial movements into the very structure of the party itself. Thus, they integrated the stratum of workplace militants into all levels of the political apparatus of the party, subjecting these militants to party discipline, but also giving them a say in formulating policy, while simultaneously injecting the Communist Party directly and intimately into industrial struggles. Industrial militants did not agree to the leadership of the party without a protracted fight, but what they finally achieved in return was a vastly increased role for economic organization and action within the overall structure of the party. On the one hand, the party created a labour union section within its leadership and organization to guide and control its industrial policies. On the other hand, it re-oriented the entire structure of the party toward industrial action through the creation of factory cells, Communist factions in labour unions, and a wide range of *ad hoc*, economically-based movements and organizations. Industrial action became the single most important aspect of party work. The party may have been in control politically, but at times — as in Britain during the campaigns of the National Minority Movement in the mid-1920s and in Germany after the founding of the *Revolutionäre Gewerkschafts-Opposition* in 1929 — the economic structures of the party threatened to engulf, even to replace, the political apparatus that was supposed to control

[13] Hinton and Hyman, *Trade Unions and Revolution*, 12.

them. If, before 1920, revolutionary workers had often joined labour unions to escape the sometimes stifling and irrelevant parliamentary preoccupations of socialists, after 1920 the Communists gave them ample room for industrial action within the party itself.[14]

Each country underwent a different realignment of groups on the left to form a new, hybrid Communist Party. To assess this realignment it is crucial to keep in mind the role of industrial militants, for they decisively influenced the original forms that Communist Parties took and often left a permanent imprint on the new organizations. The Comintern did not simply impose its position on these groups of industrial militants, but instead it negotiated with them and adapted itself to conditions in each country and internationally in such a way that a *new* Communist Party and position emerged that could take into account the experience of industrial militants.

In Germany, left-wing Social Democrats who had followed Rosa Luxemburg in support of the mass strike joined forces with the new generation of rank-and-file militants in the revolutionary industrial unions *(Arbeiter-Unionen)* and in the shop stewards' and factory councils' movements (mostly left-wing Independent Social Democrats). Indeed, although virtually no historian has done so, it might be more enlightening to analyze the German Communist Party in terms of this constellation of different kinds of industrial militants instead of rehashing the ideological divisions among Spartacists, Independent Social Democrats and assorted left radicals.[15] In France, the *Comité Syndicaliste Révolutionnaire*, which coordinated the minority within the CGT before 1920, became one of the two major groups that provided the Third International with a foundation in France. Later, when these same syndicalists left the CGT to form the CGTU, they opened the way for communist influence in the labour unions. It can be argued that the syndicalists-turned-communists in the CGTU had a more profound long-range effect on the structure of French communism than all the political agitators who came to the Comintern from the Socialist Party.[16] In Britain, the convergence of communism and industrial

[14] For a detailed analysis of the development of Communist organization and policies toward labour unions, see Peterson, "Policies and Work," ch. 11; on the tendency for economic policies to overwhelm the party, see Calhoun, *The United Front*, 64-5, and Roderick Martin, *Communism and the British Trade Unions, 1924-1933* (Oxford 1969). There are no studies of the *Revolutionäre Gewerkschafts-Opposition* in Germany between 1929 and 1933. My conclusions are based on unpublished research into the development of the RGO in Rhineland-Westphalia, where the German Communist Party's work was overwhelmingly concentrated on the RGO. The RGO so duplicated the party organization and preoccupied party members that, by 1932, many Communists were wondering what the party's role was. This contributed to a major crisis in the party in early 1932, which was resolved in part by a decision to de-emphasize the RGO and to reassert the leadership role of the party.

[15] Cf. Peterson, "Policies and Work," ch. 9; and Lucas, *Zwei Formen*.

[16] Wohl, *French Communism*, 347-8. This line of argument should be investigated more systematically. Most authors continue to stress the role of socialists-turned-com-

militancy was made easier by the fact that a disproportionate number of Communist leaders came from the Socialist Labor Party, the one Marxist party that had consistently advocated industrial unionism before 1914 and that had been most active in the shop stewards' movement during the war. In any case, early British communism stood in direct personal, as well as political and economic, continuity with the industrial movements of 1910-20. In many ways the National Minority Movement tried to carry on the legacy of 1910-20 under drastically different political and economic conditions.[17] In Italy, as mentioned earlier, the group of Socialists around *L'Ordine nuovo* formed one of the constituent parts of the Italian Communist Party, in the long run the most influential, although the early victory of Fascism makes it impossible to say how the militants in the factory councils and their theoretical supporters might have influenced the Italian party.[18] Thus, in Europe industrial militants constituted an extremely important element in the new Communist Parties.

In North America, on the other hand, the Communist Parties tended to react against, rather than carry on directly, the pre-1920 traditions of industrial unionism. The Communists introduced the Comintern's programme, tactics, and organization concerning industrial movements, and in the United States the new communist approach converged with that of the industrial organizer William Z. Foster, who succeeded in making the CPUSA an influence to be reckoned with in the unions. Also, a section of the IWW and OBU favoured adherence to the Red International of Labor Unions and the Comintern, although the majority in control of these organizations opposed affiliation. Nevertheless, the Communist Parties of Canada and the United States did not directly carry on the work of the OBU and IWW, both of which remained independent and

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munists and the dominating influence of the Comintern (that is, the Soviet Union). For the traditional non- (or anti-) communist view, which Wohl also largely represents despite his occasional insights into the role of industrial militants, see Annie Kriegel, *Les communistes français: Essai d'ethnographie politique*, 2nd ed. (Paris 1970); and Ronald Tiersky, *French Communism, 1920-1972* (New York 1972). The schism in the CGT and the history of the CGTU are only beginning to be studied more closely. The two general works — an older study by Annie Kriegel, *La croissance de la CGT 1918-1921* (Paris 1966), and more recently Jean-Louis Robert, *La scission syndicale de 1921: Essai de reconnaissance des formes* (Paris 1980) — are heavily statistical and do not emphasize problems of political practice or industrial action. For a different approach emphasizing workplace and community, though concentrating on a later time period, see Yves Lequin, "Social Structures and Shared Beliefs: Four Worker Communities in the 'Second Industrialization,'" *International Labor and Working Class History*, 22 (1982), 1-17, esp. 10 for a reference to the CGTU in the 1920s. More specifically on the CGT and CGTU at the time of the schism, see Amdur, *Unity and Schism in French Labor Politics*.

[17] Cf. Hinton and Hyman, *Trade Unions and Revolution;* Macfarlane, *British Communist Party;* Kendall, *Revolutionary Movement in Britain;* and Martin, *Communism and British Trade Unions*.

[18] Cf. Cammett, *Antonio Gramsci*.

anti-communist unions, but linked up primarily with different, less obvious traditions of industrial militancy, often mediated by groups of immigrant workers. Perhaps the Communists in North America were too sectarian to make the kinds of compromises that European Communists made with their organizations of industrial militants. Perhaps they reacted to the suppression of the OBU and IWW by insisting rigidly on the need for party supremacy over the unions, something which the leaders of the OBU and IWW refused to accept in so uncompromising a fashion. It would seem that members of the OBU and IWW reacted to their failures differently from their European counterparts and did not seek a working relationship with the Comintern with the same sense of urgency, although both unions briefly explored such a possibility. The fact that only a minority in the OBU and IWW favoured adherence to the Comintern left the supporters of one big unionism in the Communist Party in a weak position, without the solid organizational backing that Communist industrial militants could rely on in Europe. For whatever reasons, North American Communists tended more to supersede and transform, rather than to carry on directly, the pre-1920 traditions of industrial militancy. The early Communist Parties of Canada and the United States shifted their centres to Ontario and New York, respectively, gravitating toward the citadels of capitalist power and away from the centres of OBU and IWW strength. Still, the Communists' success in superseding earlier movements was due in large part to their ability to incorporate the lessons of industrial militancy and industrial unionism into their economic strategy. An indirect tribute to the earlier movements, perhaps, but one that was in the long run no less effective. Certainly the influence of Canadian and American Communists in the industrial union drives of the 1930s and 1940s was due in no small part to the success with which they had internalized the lessons of their predecessors.[19]

Not all the pre-1920 industrial militants went over to the Communists, and not all those who adhered to the Comintern in 1920 stayed with it beyond 1925. For example, when the issue was forced in 1920 between choosing for the Socialists or the Communists, some militants opted for the former. In France some of the old syndicalists preferred to give up their revolutionary orientation and work out an alliance with the Socialists for social reform, while in Italy some members of the *L'Ordine nuovo* group, like Angelo Tasca, supported the

[19] Avakumovic, *Communist Party in Canada*, 1-53; Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 3-63; Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men*, 219-28; Penner, *Canadian Left*, 124ff.; Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 349-468; Len De Caux, *The Living Spirit of the Wobblies* (New York 1978), 119-50; Cochran, *Labor and Communism*, 20 ff.; Phil Bart, *Working Class Unity: The Role of Communists in the Chicago Federation of Labor, 1919-1923* (New York, 1975); Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years, 1920-1933* (Baltimore 1966); Brian Peterson, "Working-Class Communism: A Review of the Literature" (Somerville MA n.d.) 3-5 [reprinted from *Radical America*, 5 (January-February 1971)]; Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York 1957).

traditional labour unions under socialist leadership rather than the newer forms of industrial militancy. On the other hand, groups of industrial militants in some countries remained loyal to either syndicalism or one big unionism, neither of which were tolerated by the Comintern in their original forms beyond 1922. A minority within the CGTU, sections of the German *Arbeiter-Unionen*, and of course the OBU and IWW fall into this category. Within the Comintern a left wing emerged which was at times associated with earlier industrial militants, although more often this left wing was politically, rather than industrially, oriented and drew its support mostly from Marxist politicians. Finally, a handful of former syndicalists in Italy were so disillusioned after the defeat of the workers' movement that they threw their support to the Fascists.[20]

There are two important points to be made about this dispersal of industrial militants after 1920. First, those who did not join the Communist International were so dispersed and so weakened by defeat and the change in economic conditions that they lost most of their previous influence. Splintered as they were, they offered little or no serious competition to a unified international communist movement. The one attempt, by syndicalists, to keep alive an organizing centre separate from the Comintern, the International of syndicalist unions, led to the holding of a few conferences in the 1920s. But the syndicalists had already been decisively defeated by 1920 and they offered no new strategy or organization to meet the changed conditions of the 1920s. And, in any case, their doctrinaire opposition to centralized organization doomed them to perpetual division.[21] Second, the Communists' success in the long term was due not so much to their winning and retaining the support of individual industrial militants, but lay in their ability to incorporate industrial activism into their programme. Thus, when workers later sought an organizational outlet for their industrial activism, they found the Communist Party ready and prepared to listen to their concerns. Even in the many cases where the Communists did not win the support of the leaders of industrial militancy, they were often able to replace these leaders with Communists or communist sympathizers who were then seen by workers as the most active elements. After 1920, the Communists' main rivals in industrial movements were social reformers in the labour unions, not the remnants of the earlier radical industrial militants. The choice had become one between reform and revolution, with revolution by and large meaning Communism.

Thus, the industrial unrest of the years 1917-20 had a lasting effect on the international workers' movement. Defeated before achieving their main objectives, industrial militants nevertheless saw much of their programme and tactics incorporated into the Communist International. The very terminology, con-

[20] On the role of syndicalists in Italian Fascism, see Adrian Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy 1919-1929* (New York 1973), 46-52, 202-36.

[21] On the decline of one group of industrial militants, see the introduction to *Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism*, ed. and introduced by D.A. Smart (London 1978), 7-49.

cepts, goals, and organization of the early communist movement would be incomprehensible without reference to the innovations in industrial struggle first tested before 1920. A realignment of the left took place which transformed both Marxian socialism and concepts of industrial organization, creating a qualitatively new understanding of the relationship between socialism and industrial action. The industrial unrest of the years 1917-20 was the cauldron in which this new alloy was formed.

There are many ironies in the ultimate trajectory of the industrial unrest of the years 1917-20. Not the least is that so political, so centralized, so doctrinaire a Marxist party as the Communist International should have carried on the legacy of industrial militancy. Moreover, the changed conditions of the early 1920s — massive unemployment, the political consolidation of the capitalist classes after World War I, the defeat of the revolutionary and industrial movements — reduced the previous level of activism and forced industrial militants and Communists alike to rethink their positions. No sooner had the Communists accepted the necessity of industrial activism than they turned their attention to the rather different problem of whether they should try to win the support of workers by appealing to the established unions or by organizing dual industrial unions. For their part, industrial militants accepted the leading role of the political party in large part to sustain the movement until conditions favoured a resurgence of industrial action and organization, but in so doing they limited their freedom of movement by making their industrial actions dependent upon an international political strategy. When the resurgence of industrial militancy came in the 1930s, much of the programme of 1917-20 had been thoroughly transformed. The movement of the 1930s revolved around a union-oriented strategy, in which industrial militancy was used to organize industrial unions. Notably absent from this conception was any serious mention of works councils or comparable organs through which workers themselves could take over production. Since so many industrial militants were now Communist Party members or sympathizers there was no attempt to create such councils spontaneously, as had been the case before 1920. Those Communist union militants who most clearly carried on the legacy of 1917-20 often found themselves in disagreement with the national and international party leadership when they tried to push industrial action beyond the limits of the party's political strategy.[22] Nevertheless, the heavy concentration of Communists on industrial activism and union organizing in the 1930s testified to how much the experience of the years 1917-20 had decisively transformed Marxist concepts

[22] For example, see David Milton, *The Politics of U.S. Labor: From the Great Depression to the New Deal* (New York 1982) for a useful analysis of debates within the Communist Party in the United States over the limits of industrial unionism. Joseph Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis, 1943-1957* (Cambridge, MA 1972), also refers repeatedly to the differences in behaviour between Communist labour unionists and party functionaries, as well as to the persistence of pre-communist, quasi-syndicalist beliefs among some leading party functionaries like William Z. Foster.

of working-class politics, despite the limitations of the Communists' political strategy.

Whatever the ultimate trajectory of the industrial unrest of the years 1917-20, one point is certain. For revolutionary socialists there could be no turning back to the socialism of the Second International. Industrial militancy could no longer be dogmatically opposed as a syndicalist deviation, as Marxists had been prone to argue. The political conceptions of the Second International were irrelevant for revolutionary socialists, not just because of the Bolshevik revolution and the founding of a new revolutionary centre in the Comintern, but also because of the indigenous industrial unrest in the advanced capitalist countries. The pre-eminently political socialism of Bebel, Jaurès, and Debs had become a thing of the past. The industrial workers of 1917-20 dug its grave, even if they later let the Communists throw in the dirt. No programme for organizing industrial workers, no strategy for socialist revolution could henceforth be advanced without first dealing with the legacy of the industrial unrest of these years.