

# Punctuation Marks: A Story of Class Struggle

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THE 1905 revolution consisted of a series of mass strikes which pushed the Tsarist regime into at least the promise of major constitutional change. The focus here, however, is not on the “results” of the 1905 revolution, but on its “prospects”;<sup>1</sup> on what its *process* promised and still can promise, even in so much less revolutionary times. 1905 was a crucial year not only for its revolutionary content but for its expression of the *dynamic*, and *form*, of working class struggle.

A drink of water: the dynamic of struggle  
There are a number of key points to be made about this dynamic. First – with all due respect to the role of the party (see below) – grass roots class struggle is “spontaneous”. This doesn’t mean spontaneity is *enough*. But, whatever the accuracy of the revolutionary analysis which predicts, builds and guides such eruptions, they occur almost entirely independently of the role and pronouncements of revolutionary organizations. There are countless examples of this, including, notably, the strikes of 1905.

The second factor might be called the “spark”. Few major working class struggles evolve gradually. Exceptions may occur within already strong workplace organizations in which strategists plan action in advance – for example the 1997 UPS strike, where ideological leadership was provided by long-time Teamsters for a Democratic Union activists – but most such sustained organizations have their origins in earlier “sparks” rather than in programmes or policies.

In general, the beginning of major unrest is almost always explosive, sparked by a “last straw” which symbolizes all that has gone before; and the spark that ignites that straw is almost always material, concrete issues of workplace conditions, wages, work time patterns etc. The Decatur War Zone of 1993, a conflagration of class struggle amongst previously conservative, impeccably “Middle American” workers, began with a strike over the imposition of new working patterns. Tabloid-reading (and producing) British printing workers engaged in a class war with the Thatcher-

ite state when Rupert Murdoch robbed them of their jobs. The final straw which pushed starvation-wage Immokalee farmworkers to begin organizing for justice in the mid-1990s was seeing an 11-year-old boy beaten for taking a drink of water. And in 1905, it was punctuation marks:

“The typesetters at Sytin’s print-works in Moscow struck on September 19. They demanded a shorter working day and a higher piecework rate per 1,000 letters set, not excluding punctuation marks. This small event set off nothing more nor less than the all-Russian political strike – the strike which started over punctuation marks and ended by felling absolutism.”<sup>2</sup>

Workers’ organizational forms

An equally crucial aspect of the class struggle dynamic illustrated by 1905 is its creation of new, independent *organisational forms* unique to grass roots struggle. Again, this phenomenon is not confined to periods of outright revolutionary upsurge. In the decidedly non-inflammatory 1950s, US activist Stan Weir noted the development of “informal underground unions” in workplaces across the country, constituting “the power base for ... insurgencies from below”;<sup>3</sup> in Britain, similarly, workplace-based independent rank and file groups grew into the shop steward networks and industry-wide “combine committees” which lent thousands of workers real power during the rank and file upsurge of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Rather more epochally, the Communards of 1871 soared, for two doomed months, to the heights of a “free town” based on factory occupations and constructed entirely according to the principles of direct self-government; workers involved in the semi-insurrectionary US “Great Upheaval” of the late 1870s generated, unknowingly, similar forms and structures.<sup>4</sup> The self-organisation of Russian workers in 1905 was not so much consciously handed down as “spontaneously” reiterated in later struggles; zoom forwards a hundred years, from the Paris Commune, the Great Upheaval, and you have the *inter-embrasa*

(inter-factory committees) of the 1974 Portuguese revolution, the Chilean *cordones* (literally “ropes”) in which networks of rank and file workers organized factory occupations in support of Allende’s doomed regime, and the Iranian *shuras* of 1979.

What is difficult for institutional loyalists to accept about such alternative structures is their espousal of the *union form*, rather than “the union”, by the rank and file activists and workers who support them. As such they reflect the philosophy of most rank and file workers: “as a general rule rank and file loyalty was to the principle of trade unionism rather than to trade unions as organizations.”<sup>5</sup> Yet the most effective organizational moves are towards that form, that dynamic, rather than being embodied in static institutions.

Rosa Luxemburg’s *The Mass Strike* supports the significance of these independent organizational forms. Quoting a representative of the Petersburg Soviet who reported, “Our trade unions are simply new forms of organisation for the direction of those economic struggles which the Russian proletariat has already waged for decades”, she comments: “A proletariat almost wholly unorganised created a comprehensive network of organisational appendages in a year and a half of stormy revolutionary struggle.”<sup>6</sup> Struggle *creates* organization: “while the guardians of the German trade unions fear that organisations will fall in pieces in a revolutionary whirlwind like rare porcelain, the Russian revolution shows us exactly the opposite picture; from the whirlwind and the storm, out of the fire and glow of the mass strike and the street fighting rise again, like Venus from the foam, fresh, young, powerful, buoyant trade unions.”<sup>7</sup>

It was this “revolutionary whirlwind”, rooted not in parties and programs but direct, materially-based class action, which created that most archetypal of independent working class organizational forms – the Soviet. Out of the “punctuation marks” strike of September 19th came the great October strike, the most clearly revolutionary of that revolutionary year; and out of that revolutionary strike, the Petersburg Soviet – a constellation, literally a “council”, of workers’ deputies from factory committees throughout the city. This “committee”-based form is characteristic, almost without exception, of every form of grass roots, non-institutional, “spontaneous” class struggle.

Party and class: the “steam”

Trotsky wrote of the Petersburg Soviet: “this purely class-founded, proletarian organization was the organization of the revolution as such.... The Soviet was, from the start, the organization of the proletariat, and its aim was the struggle for revolutionary power.”<sup>8</sup> Lenin welcomed the Soviets as “organs of the *general revolutionary* struggle against the government”.<sup>9</sup> Yet, not long after its birth, even major revolutionaries appeared to have given up on or even overlooked the significance of the

Soviet. Rosa Luxemburg, one of the most enthusiastic supporters of workers’ self-organization, failed to mention it in her classic treatment of 1905, *The Mass Strike*; and Trotsky omitted the Soviet completely from his 1906 post mortem, *Results and Prospects*.

Why the ambivalence? Part of the problem was that the Soviet, despite its revolutionary trajectory, could not *lead* the revolution. In the coda to the argument quoted above, Lenin makes it clear that: “It was not some theory ... not party doctrine, but the force of circumstances that ... transformed [Soviets] into organs of an uprising ... ‘Soviets’ and similar mass institutions are in themselves *insufficient* for organizing an uprising.”<sup>10</sup> Trotsky makes the same point from the opposite point of view: “The social-democratic [revolutionary] organization ... was able to speak for the masses by illuminating their immediate experience with the lightning of political thought; but it was not able to create a *living* organizational link with these masses....”<sup>11</sup> The “lightning of political thought” was missing from the essentially event-driven, materially-based dynamic of the Soviet; the “link” with that dynamic was missing through the party’s relative lack of influence and position within the masses at that time.

The dialectical opposition indicated in both these comments tells us not only why the Soviet could not perform the work of the party, but also, of course, why the party would have been nothing without the Soviet, or at least the living, breathing mass revolt it represented. As Trotsky wrote elsewhere – a quote cited in the very similar circumstances of France in May 1968 – “Without a guiding organization the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam not enclosed in a piston box. But nevertheless what moves things is not the piston, or the box, but the steam.”<sup>12</sup>

This dialectical opposition looks almost like common sense. But not all revolutionaries are keen to acknowledge the interaction between these two sides of the insurrectionist coin. Even Gramsci, a brilliant exponent of the contradictory and dynamic nature of class consciousness in struggle, remarked in an amused (and rather patronising) response to *The Mass Strike*: “Rosa – a little hastily, and rather superficially, too – theorised the historical experiences of 1905. She in fact disregarded the ... organisational elements which were far more extensive and important in these events than – thanks to a certain ‘economistic’ and spontaneist prejudice – she tended to believe.”<sup>13</sup>

In fact, the essential point is that political organization and “spontaneism” are not mutually exclusive; the place of a conscious revolutionary leadership is *with* the class, rather than above or beyond it. As Engels complained of the 19th-century British sect, the Social Democratic Federation: “It insisted upon ... unfurling the red flag at the [1889] dock strike, where such an act would

have ruined the whole movement, and, instead of gaining over the dockers, would have driven them back into the arms of the capitalists.”<sup>14</sup> Lenin, usually regarded (unfairly)<sup>15</sup> as the arch apostle of the theory that revolution can only be “brought to” the working class “from without”, moved away from that position both before and after its classic expression in the 1902 pamphlet *What Is To Be Done?* – each time as a result of struggle. In 1899, moved by the mass strikes already gripping Russia, he wrote: “Every strike brings thoughts of socialism very forcibly to the workers’ mind.”<sup>16</sup> Still more enthusiastically, in 1905: “One is struck by the amazingly rapid shift of the movement from the purely economic to the political ground ... and all this, notwithstanding the fact that conscious Social-Democratic influence is lacking or is but slightly evident.”<sup>17</sup> In 1917, on the eve of the Russian revolution, he concluded that “A specifically proletarian weapon of struggle – the strike – was the principal means of bringing the masses into action.... Only struggle educates the exploited class.”<sup>18</sup>

In alternating between “optimistic” and “pessimistic”<sup>19</sup> views of the potential of trade union struggle, Lenin’s writings simply reflect the two poles of the dialectic which constitutes the logic of working class struggle and consciousness, itself reflecting the contradictory character of capitalist production relations. While the experience of exploitation may not generate revolutionary consciousness, it also precludes uninterrupted acceptance of the *status quo* – simply because the system itself disrupts that very *status quo*, time and again. The exigencies of profitability preclude any lasting stability, sustained reforms, or uninterrupted advances in working class standards of living. In this way those at the sharp end of the contradiction, whatever their pre-existing consciousness, are pushed time and again into struggle against, or at the very least disillusionment with, the system – a point recognised by the Lenin of 1905, if not by the Lenin of *What Is To Be Done?*

Occasionally and in flashes

Clearly, both sides of the dialectic of “spontaneous” struggle and effective political praxis have to be held in view at the same time. And the hinge of the dialectic? Consciousness. As Lenin had argued, “it was not some theory” which drove the revolutionary spirit behind the Soviets. The direction of revolutionary, political, consciousness is not down *from* the party *to* the class, but *out of* the “consciousness-raising” quality of class struggle towards openness to revolutionary theory, which begins to seem increasingly relevant to the concrete concerns of the working class. Yet the contradictory, uneven and unpredictable dynamic of such struggle belies static conceptions of “stages” in the growth of class consciousness. As Rosa Luxemburg put it, working class consciousness “does

not proceed in a beautiful straight line but in a lightning-like zigzag”.<sup>20</sup>

One major analyst of the kind of “leaps” or “breaks” in consciousness experienced in struggle is Antonio Gramsci. Pinpointing the “contrast between thought and action” among workers in struggle, whose actions often contradict their ideological awareness, Gramsci points out that “the social group in question may indeed have its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic; a conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally and in flashes – when ... the group is acting as an organic totality”.<sup>21</sup>

The essential element here is the break, the *action* which, “lightning-like”, can take ideologically-colonised workers from passive acceptance to outrage and resistance. It is this break which gives “the Party” its chance – not the other way around. Over and over again, in every historical example of major class struggle, the same elements of explosiveness, of unpredictability, of unstoppable motion, are apparent.

A central characteristic of “spontaneous” resistance is its *resurgence*. Like apparently dead wood which suddenly bursts into flame, an era which seems weighed down by total reaction can suddenly be transformed by the unpredictable, ground-up dynamic of materially-based working class struggle. The apparent doldrums of mid 19th century trade unionism in Britain, casting Marx and then Engels into cynical despair, were broken by the explosive mass upsurge of New Unionism in the late 1880s: “It is the movement of the greatest promise we have had for years.... If Marx had lived to witness this!” wrote Engels excitedly.<sup>22</sup> Even in 1905, after the initial January uprising, “the turmoil was over; and in the spring the Labour movement was in the doldrums. The strikes had fizzled out”.<sup>23</sup> It was the takeover of the Battleship Potemkin by its sailors in June 1905 – sparked by the decidedly material issue of rotten meat – that was to set in motion the dynamic of struggle once again.

The task of revolutionaries is not to conjure up or even necessarily to predict such motion – not usually, in any case, possible – but to be *ready* for it, through building an in-class leadership open to and aware of revolutionary ideas through what are often the long years of “downturn” – a preparatory process which means that, in the next upsurge of struggle, revolutionary leadership is not “caught unawares”. As Trotsky put it, writing about what he called “opportunists” (quasi-revolutionary liberals): “It may seem paradoxical to say that the principal psychological feature of opportunism is its *inability to wait*. But that is undoubtedly true.... And that is precisely why great events always catch it unawares.”<sup>24</sup>

But are such “great events” still possible? In the airbrushed consumer culture of modern times, the idea that any small example of “against the

stream”, economically-based struggle can shake the foundations of an apparently seamless hegemony appears laughable. Yet the impact of such struggle on the consciousness of those involved, over and over, is to release them into a sphere in which perceptions of the world undergo a 360-degree turnaround. In the words of yet another “economistically”-motivated striker, in yet another bulk-standard American struggle of the 1980s: “You have to understand what it was like.... There was a lot of solidarity, togetherness.... It was kind of a revolution, like during the sixties, during the Civil Rights movement or ... the Vietnam war.... You had the company and you had us.... it was no longer a big family. Everyone was choosing up sides.”<sup>25</sup>

From a bad labor contract to “a kind of a revolution”; from piecework rates for punctuation marks to the genuine article: the dynamic is the same. In celebrating the determined, passionate, inspiring spirit of hundreds of thousands of far from “ordinary” workers in the great struggles of 1905, we remember them, as French workers remembered the Communards in 1968, as the pioneers of an ongoing struggle, a struggle which, however pedestrian its forms, however stifled by the somatic blandness of 21st-century America, is the one thing the ruling class is unable to eradicate – and the one hope of freedom for us all.

#### Notes

1. Leon Trotsky, *Results and Prospects*, 1906.
2. Leon Trotsky, *1905*, Vintage Books, 1971, p.85.
3. Stan Weir, *USA – The Labor Revolt*, New England Free Press, p.279.
4. Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!*, South End Press 1997, pp.13ff.
5. Tony Lane, *The Union Makes Us Strong*, Arrow Books 1974, p.180.
6. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike*, Merlin Press 1906, pp.54, 62.
7. Luxemburg, *Mass Strike*, pp.35, 63.
8. Trotsky, *1905*, pp.104, 251.
9. Lenin, *Collected Works (CW)*, Vol.8, pp.124-5, emphasis in original.
10. Lenin, *CW* Vol.11, pp.124-5.
11. Trotsky, *1905*, p.105.
12. Quoted by Daniel Singer in *Prelude to Revolution: France in May 1968*, South End Press 2002, p.1.
13. Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, Lawrence and Wishart 1971, p.223.
14. Interview with the *Daily Chronicle*, 1 July 1893; quoted in Kenneth Lapides, *Marx and Engels on the Trade Unions*, International Publishers 1987, p.165.
15. Hal Draper, ‘The Formation of the Bolshevik Party: Myth and History’, Lecture, 19 March 1963; cited in Alan Johnson, ‘Hal Draper: A Biographical Sketch’, *Historical Materialism* No.4, 1999.
16. Lenin, ‘On Strikes’ (1899), *CW* Vol.4, pp.315.
17. Lenin, ‘The St. Petersburg Strike’, *CW* Vol.8, pp.92-3.
18. Lenin, ‘Lecture on the 1905 Revolution’ (1917), *CW* Vol.23, pp.239-42.
19. Richard Hyman, *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism*, Pluto Press 1971. Most of the quotes used here are taken from this pamphlet.
20. Luxemburg, *Mass Strike*, p.73.
21. Antonio Gramsci 1971, p.327.
22. Friedrich Engels, letter to Eleanor Marx in *The Labour Elector*, 26 August 1889.
23. Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky 1879-1921*, Vintage Books 1965, p.118.
24. Trotsky, *1905*, pp.300-1.
25. Marc Lendler, *Crisis and Political Beliefs: The Case of the Colt Firearms Strike*, Yale University Press 1997, pp.42-3.

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