The Italian nation came out of the First World war in dire economic straits. In 1915 the country was still backward industrially, agricultural production was still all-important to the economy, and it had been ill-prepared for the enormous expense of fighting a war. During the war years, state expenditure had risen enormously from 2,287 million to 30,857 million lire per annum. Simultaneously, the mobilisation of vast numbers of peasants had resulted in drastic falls in agricultural production and consequently in national income from that important sector. In 1915-19, the grain crop had fallen from 52 to 46 million quintals; the maize crop from 25 to 22 million quintals, and the beet sugar crop from 21 to 15 million quintals. (1) In 1919 the result was, as one post-war prime minister, Giolitti, put it, that “the public debt had risen from 13 to 94 billions”, and there was an annual deficit of four thousand million lire. (2) If immediate steps of extreme urgency were not taken, this would conduct the country to ruination. He concluded that the Italians would have to pay their debts themselves, or make their country ever-more indebted to countries like the United States.

Most Italians had suffered economically from the war. The rapid increase in State expenditure had created corresponding inflation. While their money bought less, the cost of living index had risen from 100 in 1914 to 248 in 1918. (3) Wages had not risen commensurately. Even what money there was did not mean corresponding
food to buy, and on occasions the staple, bread and pasta, ran out completely. (4) The result was a populace made poorer by the war and less in a position to pay any national debts than it had been in 1915.

The working class had been subjected to martial discipline in the factories during the war to ensure that production was unimpaired. In cities like Turin, this meant that a traditionally militant working class was obliged to forego practically all its claims for improvements in its conditions precisely at a time when they were most needed to offset increases in prices. Strikes were illegal and the unions, who were led by reformists, many of whom favoured the war effort, could do little to defend the workers' interests. Even organisations like the metalworkers' commissioni interne (shop committees) feared to protest about conditions to the military delegates who ran the factories, as the slightest suggestion of independence could mean the withdrawal of a man from inclusion on the list of reserved occupations, and dispatch to the front. (5) The result was a working class boiling with resentment, which sometimes exploded in rebellion, when, for example, the bread ran out in Turin in August 1917. Like Gramsci, the workers believed that the bourgeoisie was responsible for the war and the miseries it had brought them to and was determined that it would pay. (6) In Turin, in particular, it was very militant, and the local authorities were fearful that its resentment would spill over into rebellion.

The only class in the community which had benefited from the war had been the capitalist class, both in banking and industry. There had been a hothouse growth in industry because of the need for war material. The production of cars had gone from 9,200 units in 1914 to 20,000 in 1918 and the production of aeroplanes from 606 in 1915 to 14,820 in 1918. The profits in the automobile industry had increased from 8.20 per cent to 30.51 per cent in two years and the value of fixed capital from 17 million lire in 1914 to 200 million in 1919. (7) Vast fortunes had been made in industry, and much had been made by the speculation of war profiteers, the pesce cani, whom Gramsci attacked so often in 'Sotto la Mole' in 1916-7. To extend and consolidate their interests, the capitalist class had strengthened the links between themselves and engaged in mergers throughout the war. But they too faced the post-war period ill-prepared to pay national debts. Their plant was old and out-of-date, and it had to be reconverted to peace-time production, profits were bound to fall, and the industries which could not survive except in the hot-house conditions of war would have to be scrapped. To modernise, the capitalists needed huge investments of capital. The steel and heavy machine industries were particularly affected by this problem. (8) None were prepared to tolerate industrial trouble. So, while the attitude of the government was that Italy should pay her debts herself, the mass of the people could not, and would not, do so, and the capitalist class would not do so.

In the last year of the war, the commissioni interna had become the primary organisation through which the Turin metal workers expressed their resentment at the conditions the 'capitalists' war had brought them to. In April 1918, it was agreed by the FIOM and the Automobile Consortium that the commissioni interna would decide disputes over piece-work rates in certain cases, and the leaders of the factory organisations spoke together with the union leaders to explain this to the masses. (9) In November 1918, Emilio Colombino, a leading Turin trade unionist, stated to the National Conference of the FIOM that the commissione interna had a leading role to play in defending workers' interests. (10) As soon as the war was ended the FIOM secured the owners' acceptance of the right of the commissione interna to exist in all metallurgical works. The commissioni themselves considered the owners' proposals before FIOM accepted them. In March 1919, the agreement was implemented throughout the industry.

At the beginning of 1918, these commissioni were little different from the collaborationist organisations which they had been before the war, when the owners used them to resolve labor disputes in the interests of maintaining production, and the union leaders looked on them as transmission belts keeping them in touch first with the organised workers, and then with the unorganised. The union leaders selected their members from among union members only. (11) On the whole, both sides, capitalist and unionist, saw them as a means of smoothing over difficulties of a minor nature, and regarded matters of substance as something to be decided at a higher level in negotiations between their respective bureaucracies.
What must be grasped is that the nature of the commissione interna was changing throughout 1918 as a result of the real pressures placed on the working class economically and socially, and because of the inability of their own union leaders to defend their interests successfully. This change implied a critique of traditional trade union methods including the role in the movement of the grass roots workers’ organisations and of the existing trade union leadership.

The union leaders’ attitude towards the masses was summed up in a speech made by Bruno Buozzi in 1916 in which he stated that the trade union organiser “must see higher and further than the masses” and sometimes use any means to get the masses to do what they did not want. (12) It was innately elitist, dividing the trade union movement into those who were capable of knowing the true interests of the workers and those who were not. It had as a corollary a bitter resentment of any attempt to poach on its preserves, or to challenge its methods. (13).

Their elitism was reflected in the lack of popular participation in the central organisations of the labor movement.

“A tiny minority of members take part in the life of the Leagues and Camera del Lavoro; the majority is regularly absent, though this does not preclude its intervening at decisive moment with a vote which displays a lack of thought … of men who are not responsible for their acts ….. The leaders acquire an authority and importance which they should not have according to the egalitarian and essentially democratic spirit of those organisations. The leaders make decisions, much, much too often, when they should be purely and simply executive and administrative officers.” wrote Gramsci in October 1918. (14)

The oligarchy of trade union leaders was quite complacent about this state of affairs. In February 1918, at a local union conference, Emilio Colombino complimented himself and his fellow reformists with a report about the good relationships the FIOM had maintained with the bosses in the factories and remarked upon the favourable financial balance of the union.

The militants from the factories did not feel the same. After hearing Colombino’s speech, Maurizio Garino, an anarchist of long standing and a member of the “rigids” “attacked the report of Colombino which was, according to him, too mild, stating that it was time to finish with the bourgeoisie, with the industrialists, and that the moment was right to act revolutionarily.”

The union leaders’ reply was to hold a tiny assembly, as was common, and replaced the “rigids” by a firmly reformist leadership comprised of Bruno Buozzi, Mario Guarneri, Gino Castagno and Alessandro Uberti. The rigids, Garino, Fassone, Boero and Parodi, were in a tiny minority for the rest of the year. (15)

As far as the reformists were concerned, they were proud of their reformism, like Buozzi, who stated late in 1918: “I am not ashamed of being a reformist -- nor a coward about it -- I’ve never hid it”, (16) and they saw the commissione interna in a reformist fashion, as an organisation to be run from the top by them. They were not going to have anarchists and syndicalists challenge their line. They represented the workers and that was that. Throughout 1918 they frustrated several efforts of the “rigids” and their anarchist and syndicalist allies to make a comeback in the FIOM.

They thus placed themselves completely out of touch with a workforce which agreed less and less with their conception of the commissioni. Symptomatic of the workers’ new attitude, which was represented best by the ignored minority on the FIOM executive in Turin, were the letters which started to be published in ‘Avanti’ in September 1918. Workers at the Farina coach builders asked: “Should the commissione interne represent the working class or the union”, and the members of the commissioni replied: “We represent the masses in the Farina plant and the union does not, because we were nominated by the masses and the union was not.” (18)
By the beginning of 1919 the union leaders were thus facing a democratic upsurge which challenged their traditional mode of rule. If they were aware of it, they dismissed it as the masses not knowing their best interests. In a vague and inarticulate fashion, the workers were groping towards a notion in which the commissioni, as the organisations which had best survived the war, and which had parallels throughout Europe and in the Soviets in Russia, whose revolution they applauded, could be used to impose their will on the employers. (19)

Some, like Giovanni Boero, drew strength from the commitment of the PSI in December 1918 to the bolsheviks’ methods and saw the commissioni as potentially revolutionary organs. In March 1919, he wrote to ‘Avanti’ asking with characteristic blunt fervour how the hell the PSI was implementing its commitment to make a revolution and suggesting that it concentrate on developing councils of workers, peasants and soldiers, and stop wasting money on electoral campaigns. (20) At this time few would have shared his advanced views. Most were concerned with obtaining a decent wage after several years when wages had fallen behind price rises.

Gramsci was a stranger to these concerns of the humble and the meek and had been regarded as a maverick by the working class leaders since his faux pas in supporting Mussolini in 1914. He, too, cordially hated some of the “rigids” for the way they had treated him in 1914-15. (21)

However, he was not blind to the implications of the last year of the war and early 1919. His understanding of the October revolution led him to contemplate with interest what was going on in the factories, both outside and inside Italy.

In the article ‘Utopia Russia’ which he published in July 1918, he pointed out that the “war was the economic fact, the practical reality of life which determined the emergence of the new (Soviet) State, which had made the dictatorship of the proletariat necessary”, because on the one hand it had concentrated power in the hands of a tiny minority, and, on the other, it had created a sense of solidarity among vast numbers of people against that minority which would not have occurred in peasant countries without the war. (22) Before the year was out he was writing in almost exactly the same terms about the effects of the war on his own country. In November he wrote:

“Four years of war have rapidly changed the economic and spiritual ambient. Huge work-forces have suddenly sprung up, and the violence innate in the relations between wage-earners and owners appears so striking that it is recognised by even the dimmest minds .... The growth of industry has been made miraculous by this saturation of class violence. But the bourgeoisie has not been able to avoid offering the exploited a terrible practical lesson in revolutionary socialism. A new class consciousness has arisen: not only in the workshop, but in the trenches which has many conditions in common with that of the workshop .... The proletarian movement must absorb this mass ... must educate each individual who composes it to become permanently and organically united with his fellows.” (23)

To this speculation that the war compelled the establishment of a new state power, Gramsci added a renewed interest in the role of spontaneous workers’ organisations, stimulated by both the example of the Russian Soviets and the development of similar organisations elsewhere in Europe. His passing interest in these institutions dated back before the war, when he and Togliatti had started to collect material on their history and development. (24) In either 1916 or 1917, he asked Togliatti to start collecting material on the English shop stewards and on the theories of Daniel de Leon. (25) When the Industrial Workers of the World ‘Liberator’ appeared in March 1918 he started reading it both for the accounts of the Bolshevik revolution and its leaders and for the extensive material on the de Leonite IWW. De Leon became of particular interest to him. (26) He also became au fait with the developments of the
shop stewards committees in the English trade union movement, publishing a long article on their evolution in ‘Il Grido del Popolo on 27 April 1918. To this article he appended the decisions of the November 1916 Leeds’ conference of shop stewards’ committees. He indicated in this article how he understood the import of these committees in England. They were necessary for the class struggle at a specific conjuncture; and implied that “the working class must win complete control over production to defend its interests, and must eliminate capital” and they would be the organs of socialist control after the revolution. They were a progression beyond the trade union, which was characterised by an absolute centralised bureaucracy, and which was corporativist in its practice and traditional and conservative. (27)

He put together his items of information in a proposal in March 1919:

“We have seen that the Workers’ Councils are the best organisation; the most sure guarantee of progress towards socialism and its realisation. Well, let us create our own workers’ councils, let us create our own Soviets, in the limits allowed to us.”

One of his followers, casting his attention around at the “limits” in the article entitled “The Dawn of Ordine Nuovo”, (28) concluded that the existing union organisations were too bureaucratised to be much use, while on the other hand, the commissioni interne which had just been extended to all metal works in Turin, offered possibilities.

In the same month, Gramsci and his friends, including Togliatti, Terracini and Tasca, who had returned from the war, started to hold meetings aimed at the formation of a new paper. Gramsci recalled “The sole feeling which united us, in our meetings, was a vague passion for a vague proletarian culture”, but his other accounts indicate that there was already some other basis for unity with the workers who attended the meetings. (29) Tasca and Gramsci were both still in the thrall of the elitist cultural policies they had held in earlier years and Gramsci was, without doubt, still influenced by “croceanism”. Doubtless, both Togliatti and Terracini were dominated by Gramsci, because he was now so important in the Turin section of the Socialist Party while they had been hors de combat for some years. But, it is a mistake to think that the relationship between Gramsci and Tasca was what was significant. Rather it was his relationship with the workers whom he had got to know since 1916 and who put him in touch with the working class reality and the men who had tenuous contacts with bolshevism, for which he was so enthusiastic.

Aron Wizner, a Polish refugee, a revolutionary socialist of working class extraction, who used to write about Russian and Polish events for ‘Il Grido del Popolo’ in 1918 under the pseudonyms Ez-Dek and Murzyn, had asked one of the people who attended the preliminary meetings of the newspaper why there had been no congress of the commissioni interne in Italy. When a technician suggested that one of the matters the newspaper should study was “the organisation of the factory as a means of production and we must work to make the working class and the party concentrate on that object”, concluding that they should seek to discover whether the Soviets had parallels in Italy, Wizner’s interlocutor remembered the question and replied: “Yes, in Turin there exists the germ of a workers’ government, of the Soviet, it is the commissione interna; let’s study this working class institution, let’s have an enquiry, and let’s study the capitalist factory, too, but not as an organisation for material production in order to have a specialised knowledge which we don’t have; let’s study the capitalist factory as something the worker needs, as a political organisation, as the ‘national territory’ of workers’ self-government.” (30).

Real concerns were impinging on the idealist schemes of the four leaders. Not until after the paper ‘Ordine Nuovo’ first saw the light of day on May 1 did they become dominant. Tasca, who had found the 6000 lire to finance it, and naturally had some influence, pooh-poohed the suggestion that they concentrate on the factory councils and filled the newspaper with his articles
and editorials of a cultural nature. Gramsci later described it as "...nothing but a ragbag anthology—a collection of abstract cultural items and a strong leaning towards nasty stories and well-intentioned woodcuts." (31)

He and Togliatti, in daily contact with the "rigid" leaders in factories, began to believe that this propaganda of Tasca's was futile and together with Terracini plotted an editorial coup d'état. This took the form of publishing the article 'Democrazia operaia on 21 June 1919 without Tasca having any knowledge of it in advance. After that date, Gramsci and Togliatti replaced Tasca as the editors of the journal and by the end of the year Tasca had virtually withdrawn from the journal. (32) The contents alone reveal why a single article represented an editorial coup d'état.

It asked:

"How can the immense social forces loosed by the war be dominated? How can they be disciplined and given a political form which has the virtue of developing normally, of continually integrating itself, until it becomes the skeleton of a socialist state in which the dictatorship of the proletariat is incarnate?

"This article is intended as a stimulus to thought and action; as an invitation to the best and most conscious workers to reflect upon this problem, and, each in his own sphere of competency and action, to collaborate in solving it, making their comrades and their associations concentrate their attention upon it. Only through this common, solid work of clarification, persuasion and reciprocal education will be born the concrete action of construction."

The article claimed that the socialist state already existed potentially in the social institutions of the proletariat, and that a true workers' democracy could be counterposed to the bourgeois state if these institutions were organised hierarchically and centrally. This democracy would then be ready to take over from the bourgeoisie.

Socialists should therefore work directly in the "centres of proletarian life": the workshops with their commissioni interne, the socialist clubs, and the peasant communities.

The main aim should be to free the commissioni interne from the limitations imposed on them by the employers, to give them new life and energy because they were already limiting capitalist power in the factories—"Developed and enriched, tomorrow they will become the organs of the proletarian power which replaces capitalism in all its useful functions of administration and leadership ..."

The first step was to organise a congress of the most advanced and class-conscious workers with the slogan: "All power in the workshop to the workshop committees": to which should be linked another slogan: "All state power to the workers' and peasants' Councils."

The socialist clubs should become the coordinating centres for the factory councils in each area, and be composed of elected delegates from all industries in the area. Thus, the area committees of the workers would become the "emanation of the whole working class" and as such able to assume the power spontaneously entrusted to them, to maintain discipline, and, consequently, to bring all work in their area to a halt.

These area committees would grow into city-wide organisations, which would be controlled and disciplined by the PSI and the trade union federations.

Such a system of workers' democracy would be a tremendous educational force, teaching the workers to think of themselves as a homogeneous group capable of political and administrative leadership. Meeting continually, the workers would elect all their leaders and exert influence on their more backward comrades "causing a radical transformation in working class psychology, making the working class better prepared to exercise power, and, through spontaneously generated common historical experience, spreading an awareness of the rights and duties of comrades and workers."

Concrete practical problems would only be solved in practice: "the dictatorship of the proletariat should stop being a mere phrase", the means to attaining it should be actively implemented.
"The dictatorship of the proletariat is the creation of a new state, which is typically proletarian, in which the institutional experiences of the oppressed class flow together, in which the social life of the working and peasant classes become strongly organised and widespread. This state does not pop up by magic: the bolsheviks worked for eight months to spread and make their slogans concrete: all power to the Soviets, and the Soviets were already known to the Russian workers in 1905. Italian communists must treasure the Russian experience and save on time and labor: the work of reconstruction will alone demand so much time and work that every act, every day must be directed towards it."

While Gramsci specifically indicated that these new organisations were not intended to replace the traditional organisations, and, on the contrary, gave the latter pride of place in the movement, as the "educators", the "focus of faith", the "depository of doctrine and the supreme power", his novel proposals implicitly attacked the PSI and the unions as they were, and explicitly postponed their leading role to a later time, claiming that they could not afford to open their doors immediately to an "invasion of new members who are unaccustomed to the exercise of power and discipline." (33)

In the context of the Turin labor movement, his proposals could only be seen as an attack on what trade unionism was. Both Tasca, long associated with the trade unions, and the reformist leaders, must have seen the article in terms of the speech Gramsci had given only days earlier at the Assembly of the Turin section of the Socialist Party. He had then urged the local socialists to give up their past stupidity and concentrate on direct power; to learn from the Russian and Hungarian revolutions and from "the revolutionary experience of the English and American working class masses who, through the practice of their factory councils, have begun that education in revolution and that change in psychology, which according to Karl Marx, must be considered the greatest symptom of the incipient realisation of communism."

Always fearful of a challenge to their authority, the reformists replied with accusations that developing the commissioni interne would split the ranks of the proletariat, and suggested that it was a "revolutionary-syndicalist" deviation. Despite Gramsci's reply that they would in fact give a stronger basis to unionism and the PSI, the Turin labor leaders saw its implicit critique of their practice and started the opposition which compelled Gramsci down a path of ever increasing intransigency. On the other hand, Tasca, who had hoped that the 'Ordine Nuovo' would work with the unions, could not avoid seeing the critique of his position in 'Democrazia operaia', and tacitly acknowledged the editorial coup d'etat. (35)

So the new line of Gramsci, his friends, and 'Ordine Nuovo' at one and the same time brought them into alliance with the workers in the factories and into opposition to the traditional methods of the union and socialist movement. Among the first and most ardent of the supporters of Gramsci's theories was Giovanni Parodi, who had known Gramsci for some time, and was on the "rigid" minority in the FIOM. (36) Parodi organised the first factory meetings after verbal propaganda and started to spread the ideas of 'Democrazia operaia', bringing Gramsci and his friends to give a series of lectures on the factory floor. (37) In this ceaseless contact with the workers, and in the mutual exchange of education, lay the secret of Gramsci's success. Years later he wrote to Togliatti that he had succeeded in linking his position with that of the workers by "never taking action without first sounding out the opinion of the worker in various ways..... so that our actions always had an almost immediate and wide success, and seemed like the interpretation of a diffuse deeply felt need, never as the cold application of an intellectual scheme." (38) Sometimes he would speak three times in an afternoon, and his staunch followers from the Youth Federation emulated him. (39) Parodi said simply that he completely "proletarianised" himself. (40) On the other hand, the union officials, faced by a cadres' crisis due to the huge growth in union members during the war, unused to consulting the democratic mass, and preferring to play a "double game" through their inefficient corporals, lost contact and control.

'Ordine Nuovo' and its followers found an increasingly militant workforce in which to evolve its ideas. The cost of living continued to rocket upwards in 1919, going from 248 to 300.6 from the 1914 base of 100. At the same time, unemployment figures rose as demobilised soldiers returned and
hot-house industry collapsed. There were two million unemployed in November 1919. Starvation threatened thousands and bread queues were matched by unemployed queues. The workers had started striking again to make up ground lost during the war and the need to defend themselves compelled them to continue. Strikes in 1919 totalled 1663 in industry and 208 in agriculture. Clashes between strikers and the police were frequent. When some workers were killed in a clash in Milan, the PSI conducted a general strike in April. This was accompanied and followed by a strike of the technicians employed in the metal-working industry, and a general lock-out throughout Turin which put 30,000 workers out of work. Such efforts by the employers to create dissension among the working class by penalising the whole workforce in the industry for the strike action of 3000 proved a total failure. Faced by common problems, solidarity was spreading among the workers. This strike was followed in June and July by riots throughout Italy against the cost of living. In Emilia and Romagna, improvised soviets arose as a result of these riots. In Tuscany and the Marches one could speak of a real popular insurrection. The PSI proposed a further general strike for 20-21 July, after meeting with other European labor parties in England. (41)

While the wave of unrest died down temporarily in other parts of Italy after June, in Turin the struggle did not let up. In August-September, the Turin workforce were again on strike “after long months of patient and exasperating negotiations between the Federation and the owners resulted in no improvement in workers’ conditions”, while prices zoomed upwards. (42)

The unrest was spontaneous and usually directed to attaining immediate improvement in economic conditions. It did, however, take on political dimensions of greater and greater import. The Italian political leaders showed no sign of giving Italy the political leadership the country needed. Orlando made a miserable and Italianate hash of affairs at Versailles, returning with a humiliating peace. The bulk of soldiers felt that they had been fighting for nothing. Rumours of a right-wing coup to save the nation spread, and the first fascist outrages started.

The desire among the workers to resolve their difficulties by following the Russian example showed more and more clearly as they flocked into the PSI, which had stated that it would introduce a dictatorship of the proletariat in Italy. Union membership rose from 32,000 in 1914 to 2,300,000 in 1919, and PSI membership from 50,000 to 200,000. In Turin, the membership of the FIOM reached over 20,000 in 1919 and the Camera del Lavoro had 90,000 members in early 1920. Local socialist party membership tripled in 1919. (43)

Despite this remarkable increase in organised militancy, both in Italy and Turin, the bulk of the increasingly militant workforce was unorganised. It was to these unorganised workers that Gramsci’s program first appealed, precisely because he laid down none of the exclusive demands that the union leaders did that all members of the commissioni interne be enrolled union members. He met some opposition at grass roots level, and bitter opposition in the bureaucracy among the organised socialists, except in some factories where he and his followers already had an advantage because of their contacts with the “rigids”, like Parodi, Boero and Garino. Parodi, who was very popular and respected by both the workers and employers for his integrity, was most important to Gramsci despite his lack of culture. One worker recalled him as “the heart” of the movement for factory councils, while Gramsci was “the brains”. (44) Parodi put Gramsci in touch with the organised workers in Fiat, where he worked.

Some of the fundamental themes emerging were:

1) Capitalism tended to atomise the working class, who sold themselves as commodities on the labor market, creating “citizen-individuals” and destroying all the “collective links” which constituted society. Under capitalism all men, and particularly wage-earners were terribly alienated from each other: “Every citizen is a gladiator, who sees in others enemies to be destroyed or to be subjugated to his will. All the higher links of solidarity and love are dissolved, from the artisans’ corporations and classes to religion and the family. Competition is installed as the practical foundation of human association: the citizen-individual is the cell of the social nebula, an uneasy and inorganic element which belongs to no organism”. It was precisely on this lack of social cohesion and disunity and uneasiness that the concept of the sovereignty of the law, a purely abstract concept, rested, as a
potential deception of popular innocence and good faith. This sovereignty of the law was an anti-social concept “because it envisages the ‘citizen’ as eternally at war with the State”, and saw men as the eternal unrelenting enemies of the State, which is “the living plastic body of society”, and thus saw men as the enemies of themselves.

2) This whole tendency was countervailed by the workers’ tendency to organise, which was itself “the reaction of society which seeks to recompose itself as a solid harmonious organ, sustained by love and compassion”. The workers spontaneously opposed the “comrade” to capitalism’s “citizen”, and expressed this in organised form. On the basis of these organisations “begins the process of historical development which leads to communism”. Therefore “associating men together can and must be assumed to be the essential fact of the proletarian revolution”.

3) During the war, and especially in the post-war period, the real naked class oppression disguised by the rule of law had become obvious to all, as the State had emerged as “arbiter of all our destinies”, and correspondingly, the huge, solid mass of workers had found new forms to express their need to realise themselves as social beings, and to supplant the trade unions which they had evolved earlier as the expression of the working class conceived of as “a function of capitalist free enterprise”, determined from outside the working class rather than from within it, and subject to the laws of the outsiders.

4) The emergence of these new organisations showed the inadequacies of both trade unionism and the Socialist Party itself. Both had accepted the terms of the capitalist state rather than acted antithetically to it. Socialists had “let themselves be absorbed by reality rather than dominated it”. They had “believed in the perpetuity of the institutions of the democratic state, in their fundamental perfection”. So the “traditional institutions of the movement had become incapable of expressing the exuberant growth of revolutionary vitality”, which Italy and the world was demonstrating.

“We are convinced after the revolutionary experience of Russia, Hungary and Germany, that the socialist state cannot continue the forms of the capitalist state, but is a creation which is fundamentally new with respect to these, if not with respect to the history of the proletariat.”

This was not an augury, or a prediction, since history was not ‘predictable’, but, following the ‘maieutic’ method, it meant working through new organisations which expressed real needs to grasp possibilities; in particular, working through the organisations which tended to replace the capitalist in the administration of industry and thus to make the producer truly autonomous.

“Never has there been a more fervent drive and revolutionary enthusiasm in the proletariat of Western Europe, but, it seems to us that a lucid and exact awareness of ends desired has not been accompanied by an equivalently lucid and exact awareness of the means suitable to attaining that end. The masses are now convinced that the proletarian state is incarnated in a system of workers’, peasants’ and soldiers’ councils. We have not yet formed a tactical conception which can objectively ensure the creation of that state. It is therefore necessary right now to create a net of proletarian institutions, rooted in the consciousness of the great mass..... It is certain that today, in present conditions of proletarian organisation, if a mass movement of a revolutionary nature took place, the results would be a purely formal correction of the democratic state and would end in increasing the power of the House of Deputies (through a Constituent Assembly) and in the assumption of power by bungling anti-communist socialists. The German and Austrian experience should teach us something. The forces of the democratic state and the capitalist class are still immense: we need not hide that capitalism is sustained especially by the work of its sycophants and its lackeys, and the progeny of that genius has not yet disappeared.

The creation of the proletarian state is not, in sum, a thaumaturgic act: it too is a construction, a process of development. It presupposes a preparatory work of propaganda and organisation. We must give the greatest power and the greatest development to the proletarian organisations which
already exist in the factories and see to it that others emerge in the villages, and ensure that the men who make them up are communists aware of the revolutionary mission that the institutions must fulfil. Otherwise all our efforts, all the faith of the masses will not succeed in preventing the revolution ending miserably in a new rogues’ parliament of irresponsible ninnies, and making necessary new and more terrible sacrifices for the advent of the proletarian state.”

As the theoretical expression of workers’ needs and desires, these proposals did not call for an immediate revolution, but emphasised that the first steps in organising for that end be taken. No blueprints were laid down for the future, and it was specifically stated that problems would be resolved by the workers as they came to them. As such, their appeal was much wider than to the communists whom Gramsci hoped would eventually become the leaders in the councils.

FOOTNOTES


5. This information is based on a manuscript written by Tasca and republished in Berti, op.cit., p.47; see also Piero Gobetti, “Le commissioni interne”, ‘La Rivoluzione liberale’, IV, No. 22, 20 September, 1925, p. 134.


13. Tasca in Berti, p. 46.


19. Factory councils were a phenomenon common to most of Europe after 1916. Richard Muller, in “Comment naquirent les conseils revolutionnaires d’Usine”, 1 July 1921 explained the origins of the Berlin workers councils in 1916-18 as the “result of the economic repercussions of the war, of the suppression of all freedom of movement in the working class by means of a state of siege, and of the total lack of power of the trade unions and political parties”.


23. Ibid., pp. 329-332.


25. Togliatti, in Ferrara and Ferrara, p. 44.


31. Ibid., p. 148.


35. Ferrara and Ferrara, p. 54; Battista Santhia, p. 70.

36. Parodi, op. cit.

37. Battista Santhia.


40. Parodi, p. 67.


43. Soave, p. 15.

