Two thousand workers, anxious to do something, to impose themselves on the chaos and lack of leadership characteristic of Turin and Italy in 1919, met in the Fiat Brevetti works in September and elected thirty-two commissars, representing eleven sections of the works, as their factory council, in an election which was a model of democratic procedure. Despite reformist warnings that the wrong men would be chosen to lead the workers, the elected commissars were all chosen from acknowledged leaders in the organised labor movement. Indicating, on the other hand, that the factory council was not only a new version of the old commissioni interne, was the statement by one Brevetti worker that the establishment of the factory council was the “first step in the revolution”. (47)

It was, indeed, the first step in the spread of factory councils, as other workforces were inspired by the action of the Brevetti-Fiat workers and within a month the councils had spread to each of Fiats’ forty-two divisions, and elsewhere. (48) In the middle of October the first assembly of the executive committees of the consigli di fabbrica met. It represented thirty thousand workers. A long program of action was drawn up, declaring itself more than a program but an exposition of the concepts which informed the new organisations, and a coming to terms with the other institutions of the labor movement.

It started by asserting that the very existence of the councils was a negation of the trade union leaders’ assertion that the trade union was the sole organisation giving expression to the social life of the workers. The councils were concerned with administering the means of production and the men who worked them and not with fixing the price of labor; they had the “potential aim of preparing men, organism and concepts through a continuous pre-revolutionary work of control, to ready them to replace the bosses’ authority in the workplace, and to place social life within a new framework.”

Consequently, in the declaration of principles it was asserted that:
1. “The factory commissars are the sole true social (political and economic) representatives of the proletarian class, because they are elected by the universal suffrage of all the workers at the place of work.”
2. The electors recognised the role of the
trade unions and expected that all workers would become unionists.
3. But, the final power in the working class movement should lie with the factory councils.
4. And, they would therefore only obey the union in its traditional role only when the commissars endorsed trade union directives.
5. And, they would resist any attempt to oust them from control of their organisations on the factory floor.
6. They would support the establishment of a single national trade union federation directed to working along the lines of the class struggle, for the communist revolution.
7. And, they asserted, the constitution of the councils marked the first step in the communist revolution in Italy.

The council’s long list of rules can be broken down into the following thematic contents:

1. The commissars, who had to work in the factories, would be nominated from each factory division in proportions to be decided. Only men who were union members and committed to the class struggle could stand, but all workers could vote in elections. Instant recall of a commissar was possible when a majority wished.

2. The commissars would have two tasks: to represent the unionists of his division by controlling the union; and to defend the economic and social interests of all the workers of the division.

3. They would submit any union agreement with the employers to the workers for ratification, and generally control such agreements.

4. They would encourage the workers to educate themselves to the realisation of their responsibility to work together as social beings.

5. All decisions would be carried out by an executive committee nominated by each factory council. (49)

The Assembly resolved to express the will of the masses and called for the extension of the movement throughout Italy.

Gramsci and his followers inside and outside the factories were the authors of this program, and as such it represented the point of view of the most politically advanced sections of councils only (50). Moreover the councils were at first composed by a majority who were not followers of Ordine Nuovo. (51)

Gramsci was not disconcerted and applauded the rapid spread in the councils. He noted particularly what he had anticipated, the increase in militancy as the councils forced the removal of all “the agents of capitalism” from the factories, and the magnificent discipline which enabled them to bring the work of 16,000 men to a halt in five minutes in December. (52) These experiences brought the mass of the workers closer to the views of the more advanced members. Meanwhile, he and his followers engaged in intensive propaganda and education through their School of Culture and Social Propaganda, which brought their ideas about the transformation of the councils into the organs of the proletarian state before the workers. (53) Tasca recalled the intensity of his work in the last three months of 1919 in these words: “We must note the intense activity of Gramsci ..... Avanti, the Central Executive of the Party, Ordine Nuovo, Sotto la Mole lectures for the factory councils ..... prodigious activity, a sickly body and a steely will .... he is a leader.”

The events which worked for the triumph of his group in the councils and in the Turin labor movement as a whole, in part were willed by him. On 1 November the ‘the rigids’ who headed the councils ousted the reformists from their controlling position in the FIOM. Ottavio Pastore, editor of the new Turinese edition of Avanti, practically turned the newspaper over to Gramsci and his supporters giving him the apparent support of the PSI. (54)

Consequently in December the local PSI
accepted the councils and set up a study group under Togliatti to examine how they could be further developed and the Camera del Lavoro voted full support of the movement announcing that:

"the movement which started spontaneously in the Turin workshops has shown that the majority of the workers are profoundly convinced of the need to begin concrete work for the communist transformation of the productive organism and affirms that it is a sign of the political maturity of the masses."

As the representative of 100,000 workers it demanded the extension of the councils throughout Italy, and affirmed that they should be used for the revolutionary transformation of society. (55)

These triumphs of the ordinovisti only redoubled the hatred and opposition of the reformist trade union leaders, who saw in the movement their own disappearance from pre-eminence. The CGL newspaper started a determined campaign against the councils in December, accusing Gramsci of anarcho-syndicalism and adventurism. Nasty reminders of his mistake in 1914 started to circulate. Embittered by the pettiness of the bureaucrats who controlled the paper, Gramsci replied shortly that any discussion with them was impossible. (56) He was forced to take an even more anti-unionist stand, where he had always been particularly careful to acknowledge the contributions of unions to the labor movement. (57)

The main object of his attack was the "bureaucratic spirit" which characterised the trade union officials and prevented their recognising that there was a crisis in the labor movement which paralleled that in the whole country. This crisis he typified as one of "power and sovereignty" - who should rule - and it determined developments in the whole socialist movement.

In this situation, where the question was one of where ultimate power lay, the workers felt that "‘their’ organisational complex has become such an enormous apparatus that it has ended up obeying laws of its own, internal to its structure and its complicated functioning, but external to the mass, which has acquired conscience of its historical mission as a revolutionary class."

This real feeling was rooted in real circumstances and produced real new institutional and organisational forms to give it expression. The factory council was the primary form of this reality and would culminate in the dictatorship of the proletariat. The union, on the other hand, despite its historical achievements, was, "the type of proletarian organisation specific to the period of history dominated by capital", and directed by technical expertise subordinated to a bourgeois overview.

This did not mean that the unions themselves had no role in the coming revolution. In fact, they would carry out the socialisation of industry after it occurred.

But to do this the bureaucratic mentality of the leaders, jealous of their power, would have to be replaced by a sentiment of solidarity. (Here Gramsci made specific reference to the disastrous experience in Hungary, where the lack of support from the union leaders had been one reason for the fall of the short-lived Soviet regime).

In sum, unions of the old sort belonged to the past, and a new sort, based on factory councils, would have to emerge. The main difference would be that the reformist leadership would be replaced not by other individualists but by representatives chosen by the workers themselves through the councils which were their class expression.

Mindful of the attacks made by the reformists that this made him a syndicalist, Gramsci also made it quite clear that he supported neither reformist nor revolutionary syndicalists. He claimed that the first were concerned only with bread and butter issues and could rise to no more than this, and the second
thought that they could make the unions a revolutionary weapon when they were not suitable for such a task.

His position of intransigent hostility towards the union bureaucracy was not merely a question of personalities, though there was a personal animus on both sides. Nor was it merely a negative estimation of the unions potential role in the existing, and worsening, social situation in Italy.

It was based on the belief that hierarchy of the sort unionism typified was innately anti-revolutionary. He believed that through making decisions for himself in the factory council, the worker obtained a consciousness of his own worth and ability to control his destinies and a feeling of inter-dependence with his fellows which he could not otherwise obtain.

"Even the most ignorant and backward of the workers, even the most vain and 'cultured' of engineers, ends up being convinced of this truth in the experience of the factory council." (58)

By 1920 Gramsci had thrown down the gauntlet before the trade union officials and their time-honored methods, and, by implication, before all the traditional methods of the Italian socialist movement. This meant that he had an uphill battle and had to find suitable allies where he could, without troubling himself about traditional hatreds and enmities. Most of the allies he found were therefore either outside the PSI or had adopted positions which conflicted with traditional PSI activity.

Among the first group were a large number of anarchists, who either belonged to the anarchist USI or were unattached. He associated himself with these people because he believed that common experience in the struggle would bring them over to the communist position. For this reason he did not include anarchist intellectuals among possible allies. Typical of his allies was Garino, Parodi's comrade in the intransigent leadership of the FIOM. (59)

Among the second group were the "abstentionists" of the PSI like Parodi and Boero, who took seriously the anti-parliamentary quality of leninism as propounded by Bordiga, and demanded that the PSI give up participating in elections and concentrate on a revolutionary path to power.

Both groups were firmly established in the factory councils, and though Gramsci did not at first share their opinions at all, he was influenced by working in unity with them, and because the triumph of his group in the councils was by allying himself with them. Their influence became ever clearer in 1920 as they helped him become the acknowledged intellectual leader of the conciliar movement and loved and respected by the masses, whose attitudes these anarchist and 'abstentionist' leaders embodied - attitudes which were increasingly in favor of a solution which was extra-parliamentary and typified by participatory democracy. Each time there was a dispute or strike in Turin, Gramsci and his followers were the first to know about it and to develop its theoretical implications - which became increasingly anti-party.

His discovery, when in 1920 the councils started to concentrate and build up their attacks on capitalism, that capitalism had allies within the PSI, only encouraged this "anti-jacobinism".

IV

The capitalists had never looked favorably on the Commissioni and were even more dubious about the development of these organisations in factory councils. At first they tried to compromise the factory councils' leaders by barely hidden bribes and presents. When they had no success with men like Parodi, who won their grudging respect, they realised that the new conciliar movement would not be incorporated into the system like earlier institutions. (60) They realised that these organisations were, as Gramsci stated, concerned not only with economic gains but with making social revolution and decided that they were not to be tolerated.
Having emerged from the war stronger and more united, and soon to establish their own nation-wide confederation (the Confindustria) the capitalists prepared to take offensive measures to crush the movement. Impelling them to immediate action was the occupation, near Turin, of factories by factory workforces in February 1920. On 7 March, Gino Olivetti, secretary general of the new employers’ federation, pronounced that two different powers could not exist in the factories. On 20 March he and de Benedetti, president of the Industrial League and Giovanni Agnelli, head of the Fiat works, informed the prefect of Turin that they proposed to conduct a general lockout to smash the movement as soon as the time was opportune. (61) Their opportunity came a few days later. The workers were opposed to the proposed daylight saving change in hours, from which they expected to lose, and upset by the reduction in the wages of some commissars. A factory council altered some of the bundy clocks in protest and the management reacted by dismissing three commissars. Immediately the local FIOM and PSI sections lent support. A general withdrawal and lockout ensued at FIAT.

Both sides were quite aware that it was a struggle between proletarian and capitalist power (62) Gramsci had set the scene on the day the dispute began with his article “The end of a power”. He described Agnelli as a “hero” of capitalism who ruled like an autocrat in a little capitalist state of fifteen thousand men. But he warned Agnelli that it was a difficult state to rule autocratically because of its size, and because it created its own antithesis in its working class, who found unity in the factory councils and who had sixty thousand mouths to feed.

Within days the other workers’ organisations of Turin had started to galvanise support for the locked out men. The owners retaliated and by April 3, 90,000 men were idle. The will of both sides hardened, as they saw that what was at stake was a crucial moral victory. Early hopes of moderation were dashed. Rumors started to fly around the city, as first the province, and then the whole of Piedmont, were involved: “fifty thousand soldiers, on the hills around a battery of artillery, reinforcements in the surrounding countryside, armored cars in the city, and machine guns trained on private houses”. Indeed, troops were moved into the vicinity of the city until railway workers in other cities prevented further dispatches.

Gramsci sarcastically thanked “the industrial lords for making clear to everybody, even though it wasn’t needed, what the terms of relative strength were”; and he warned that there could be no favorable resolution for the Turin workers if they did not extend the strike throughout Italy. On April 13 a general strike was declared in Turin and the province and 500,000 workers stopped work.

Gramsci and the Turinese leaders then turned to the “fire-breathing” maximalist leaders of the Socialist Party, and to their rivals in the General Confederation of Labor, with an appeal to extend the strike; this was essential to the success of the Turinese workforce. The Party and the CGL refused to support the extension of the movement and ten days later the workers returned to the factories on the owners’ terms. (It was a disaster.)

Gramsci had learnt a further lesson about the PSI and the CGL and he wrote: “The Turinese working class has been defeated. Among the conditions determining this defeat .... was the limitedness of the minds of the leaders of the Italian working class movement. Among the second level conditions determining the defeat is thus the lack of revolutionary cohesion of the entire Italian proletariat, which cannot bring forth .... a trade union hierarchy which reflects its interests and its revolutionary spirit. Among the first level conditions which determined the defeat we must therefore place the general state of Italian society, the conditions of life in every province and every region in which the Confederation of Labor has a branch. And it is certain that the Turinese working class was defeated because in Italy there do not exist, or have not yet matured, the
necessary and sufficient conditions for an organic and disciplined movement of the *working class and peasants together* (my emphasis - A.D.). This immaturity, this inadequacy of the Italian working people is undoubted evidence of the ‘superstition’ and mental limitedness of the leaders responsible for the Italian working people.”

Though the capitalists had made minute and extensive preparations to crush the working class from the time of the Milan conference of the Confindustria, the leaders of the Socialist Party had done nothing about it, giving the workers a tremendous disadvantage.

The solidarity of workers both inside and outside Turin after the general strike had been declared had led to a belief in “the possibility of a general insurrection of the Italian proletariat against the State” but it was thought bound to fail because of inadequate preparation.

Forced, and still forced after the defeat, into specific forms of organisation by the objective conditions, the workers were also forced into their action - something little understood by the ‘cold unenthusiastic bureaucrats’ who ran the workers’ organisations, who had been placed there by nepotism and bureaucracy and not by the workers themselves.

Gramsci concluded that the PSI leaders who could have, if not secured the success of the strike, at least maintained and secured the gains the workers had made in the factories, had done nothing, and the Turin workforce would now have to fight on two fronts: for the conquest of industrial power and for the conquest of the trade unions and proletarian unity. (63)

V

Gramsci and his friends had been forced into a position of opposition to the maximalist leaders of the PSI like that towards the trade union leaders. It was not the first time that Gramsci and his followers had taken a position of criticism vis-a-vis the maximalist leaders of the party. In January he had called on them to “renew the party” if they did not wish to be left behind by events. On 11-13 January at a PSI conference in Florence, Terracini had criticised Serrati for advancing a “maximalism” which is no more than a “literary exercise and a theoretical proposal”, and told him to work in the factories or return to the “melting-pot” of centrism. (64)

But it was with their lack of support from the locked-out workers in April that Gramsci moved into a position of more extreme criticism, and an ever-widening rift developed between him and the party leaders.

The party leaders had done nothing to implement the decisions of December 1918 despite an increasing disimprovement in conditions among the working class. The first step in this implementation should have been the expulsion of the reformists from the party because after the leadership had decided in favor of creating a dictatorship of the proletariat in Italy. The reformists, who openly supported the reconstruction of capitalism in Italy decided, at a meeting held on 22-23 December 1918, to oppose the leadership’s commitment to the Russian revolution. Their leaders, Turati and Treves, wrote and spoke in denigration of the revolution and Lenin, and denied the appropriateness of Bolshevik methods in Italy (65) throughout early 1919, but Serrati tended to be affected by their vigor and his campaign against them was weak. Though the reformists themselves challenged him to expel them, he and his supporters made no attempt to do so. It appears that Serrati was so fearful of splitting the party he had united five years before that he was prepared to advance views little different from those of Treves in *Critica sociale*, and which blatantly ignored the party’s commitment to revolution. Indeed, in January 1919 Serrati said that: “The fact that we won the war has made impossible in Italy the methods used in Russia and Germany - in Italy the consequences of the war have created a reformist and democratic situation.” (66)
This policy of concessions to the anti-revolutionaries did not correspond with the increasing class consciousness among the workers and the obviously imminent frontal clash between capitalism and the proletariat, which the party leaders ignored in the interests of maintaining unity with the reformists.

As a consequence of their wilful blindness to reality, the maximalists made no preparations for the revolution to which they were committed. No increased expenditure was made on organisation and propaganda. Even the most intransigent of the maximalists, those of Turin, suffered from a form of fatalism and waited for the revolution to happen as the result of one of the many revolts, strikes and killings of the first half of 1919. Nenni himself was forced to admit: "Nobody placed himself at the head of the mass, nobody tried to provide a political outlet to the malcontent." (67) The masses, when they fought, therefore fought for petty-bourgeois objectives. (68)

After July the first post-war wave of unrest died down, and the various sections of the party started to prepare for the party congress in Bologna in October, and the Italian general elections in November. The polemic between the maximalists and the reformists continued without resolution. The first had now committed themselves to the Third International, which was formed at Moscow in January 1919 and whose aim was to destroy social-democracy and conduct the world revolution. The second replied by attacking the maximalist program for Italy as "the complete destruction of the party". (69) Even now Serrati's response was limited to words. He reproved Turati for "anti-revolutionary" activity when "he well knows that almost all of the party maintains that bolshevism is the purest expression of its doctrine" (70) and called for "a sharp turn of the helm to the left". He even started a new journal, *Il Comunismo* to propagate the ideas of the Third International.

In its first number he specifically called for the expulsion of the reformists and a complete centralisation of the party as necessary so that the PSI could "..... gather with all its forces, in a fully conscious manner, the collapsing bourgeois regime" in a revolution. (71)

Yet he never got beyond verbal attacks. Although at the Bologna congress the party accepted bolshevism and adhesion to the Third International by an overwhelming vote of 48,411 to the reformists' opposing 14,880, Turati and his followers were not expelled and rushed off to tell their electors that these new views would be opposed. Turati publicly stated that he and his followers would stay in the party to temper the "foreign influence". He denied that there was any revolutionary situation in Italy, or that there was any possibility of one developing. (72) He referred to the dictatorship of the proletariat as "a mean ideal of brutal and armed violence".

Serrati, despite Lenin's urging that he expel the "open and masked opportunists and there are many of them in the Italian parliamentary group", still only engaged in verbal polemics with Turati. He denied that his group had thought of making "a systematic doctrinal defence of violence, to found on violence the new order of communism" but recognised "our practical and contingent adhesion to the use of violence." (73) "The regime of the Soviets, of the councils of workers, is already a fact, not only in Russia, but everywhere". So Turati's defence of the traditional methods of the PSI in their stead was a "puerile illusion". (74)

This lip service to the conciliar system hid the truth that Serrati had not approved of the factory councils of Turin. He did not believe that they should be elected democratically, and thus include anarchists and syndicalists. In November 1919 he called them an "aberration". (75)

Thinking like a blanquist, he did not believe in the revolutionary potential of the "amorphous mass" and thus thought that the councils could be only "technical" organisations, leaving making revolution to the party. (76)

Gramsci had bitterly opposed the reformists and supported the maximalists
through 1918-19, but this hostility of Serrati caused him to reprove:

"The Socialist Party hasn’t even attempted to get out of the realm of verbal affirmations, it has not given the workers and peasants the concrete guide to make real institutional innovations. For the Third International, ‘making’ the revolution means ‘giving’ power to the soviets, means struggling to attain a communist majority in the soviets; for the Third International being revolutionary means getting out of the realm of trade union corporativism and party sectarian activity and seeing the movement in masses of human beings which is seeking a form, and working so that that form is the system of councils. Lenin’s letter (in support of maximalism) sanctions a rather unhappy and unreassuring situation; we totter between catastrophe and a worse catastrophe - a Constituent Assembly.” (77)

A month after, in January, he called for a renewal of the Socialist Party because it had not organised the masses whom it had aroused with its revolutionary speeches, when its task was to prepare conditions favorable for a proletarian democracy. (78) In particular, he wanted the party to expel the reformists. When this desire was coupled with his association in Turin with found himself very close to the positions and members of the “abstentionist” group in the party, which was led by Bordiga.

Bordiga had been greatly disconcerted by Serrati’s refusal to take concrete action against the reformists. Through the journal he and his followers had set up in December 1918 he engaged in savage condemnation of the reformists and opposed all maximalist compromises with them. (79)

In February 1919 he came out openly in favor of violent revolutionary action and eschewal of all parliamentary activity, earning the denomination “abstentionist”. When the maximalist leaders refused to consider this policy, despite their adhesion to the Third International, which demanded similar action, Bordiga condemned them, as Gramsci did later in the year, for lack of “precise directives”. (81) By the middle of 1919 his group had won many regional sections of the PSI to their intransigent position. (82) At the Bologna conference, Bordiga expressed the position of himself and many of his followers clearly:

“We, comrades, have been badly misunderstood: people in many quarters have spoken of anarchism and syndicalism. Instead we are - and we will be - marxist socialists; we hope to show that our present position corresponds completely with what are the basic doctrines of the party, laid down by the classic Manifesto of 1848. Socialism was elaborated as a doctrine substantially through a critique of bourgeois idealist and utopian conceptions, an interpretation of history which made the emancipation of the proletariat no longer a problem of ideal Justice but a complex historical development which was studied in all its developments, from which was deduced the origins in history of societies which have preceded us, and in the organism of contemporary society, and thus could be foreseen its coming end.” (83)

He went on that as marxists, he and his followers believed that parliamentary democracy was a bourgeois sham, though ‘social-democrats’ had ignored this fundamental marxist tenet. The Russian revolution had belied parliamentary practice by showing what methods marxists should use. He concluded by demanding the expulsion of any socialist who would not accept bolshevism, adding that he feared that the maximalists would not do this as they were too concerned with electoral success to split the party. (84)

Bordiga’s dark expectations were fulfilled. Serrati did nothing to expel the reformists, as we have seen, and despite disclaimers that he was interested in success in the November elections, started to gather parliamentary aspirants around him after October.
By 1920 Bordiga was so bitterly hostile to the reformists and maximalists that Il Soviet printed these words: “In our view, nothing does so much good as a split. The first things must be to put everyone in his proper place. One will know in this way exactly who is a communist and who is not: there will be no more confusion on this score..... A good split clears the air. Communists to one side, reformists of all persuasions and gradations to the other.”

This general convergence of Gramsci’s and Bordiga’s views should not mislead us about their differences. Despite the leading role played in the factory councils by “abstentionists”, Bordiga was as opposed to them as Serrati. Misunderstanding Gramsci’s notion of their role, and, perhaps chagrined by the Turinese support for electoral activity in November 1919 (even the local “abstentionists” supported this, support which spelled defeat for his group in early 1920, Bordiga attacked the councils as a concession to gradualism, based on the error that fundamental gains could be made on an economic terrain rather than in a frontal assault.

Despite such abiding differences, by April Gramsci had come over to Bordiga’s position on the party. Faced by the blatant PSI opposition to the councils during the lockout, Gramsci expressed a sneering hostility at the party’s meeting in Milan, when it had planned to meet in Turin. He demanded that the party clean itself up. Except in Moscow, where Lenin read his report with approval; his attack was ignored.

The defeat of the strike, the disastrous setback to the councils, and the negative role of the party symbolised in the shifting of the venue of the party meeting from Turin to Milan, brought home to Gramsci the all important role the party could play in the success or failure of a revolutionary movement. Henceforth he directed as much attention to the party as to the councils. At the time of the strike he had indicated that the efficacy of the councils would be nil unless the party played a positive role in extending them to other areas and supporting their activity. Henceforth, while keeping the councils going, the foremost immediate task was to renew the party. The party he proposed in May 1920 was something fundamentally and radically new, and a complete departure from previous PSI traditions.

48. Gramsci had a clear intuition that this would happen. See *Ordine Nuovo*, pp. 31-34.

49. This declaration was promulgated on 31 October 1919. See *Ordine Nuovo*, pp. 192-3.


51. Battista, Santhia, p. 70.


55. Guarnieri, pp. 28ff.


57. See e.g. the decisions of the Camera del Lavoro in Guarnieri, p. 28, pp. 49-50; Caracciolo in *Mondo operaio*, op. cit.


61. See *Ordine Nuovo* p. 109 for Gramsci’s description of the Milan meeting of Confindustria; Guarnieri, pp. 60-8; Spriano, *Gramsci e l’Ordine Nuovo*, p. 103.

62. See e.g. the Camera del Lavoro’s motion in Guarnieri, p. 74.


65. Turati wrote in a reply to an article by Antonio Labriola in support of leninism, “that ‘Viva Lenin’ meant ‘death to socialism’ ”, *Critica sociale*, op. cit., p. 435.


67. Nenni, p. 31; Davidson, p. 359.

68. Cortesi, p. 709.


71. *Il Comunismo*, 1 October 1920, p. 2ff.


73. *Il Comunismo*, 1 November 1919, p. 184.


82. Cortesi, p. 708.

83. Cortesi, p. 735.


86. Guarnieri, pp. 52ff.