

Address to the Italian Proletariat On the Current Possibilities for Social Revolution¹

By the Italian Section of the Situationist International
Translated by Bill Brown

Comrades,

What the Italian proletariat is making in the factories and on the streets is not a revolution, but it is, certainly, *already* revolutionary. Italy is at the center of the crisis that affects bourgeois and bureaucratic capitalism everywhere, as well as at the center of the launching of the second assault by the proletarians of all countries *against every power*. But even today the *truth* of this foreshadowed movement is better known through its enemy's fears than through the asserted will of its direct protagonists. And now this unstoppable process only lacks the consciousness of what it has already done on a few occasions to see what it can do and what it can do *everywhere*.

The return of class struggle, which has been absent for a long time, finds its assured beginning in the new movement of spontaneous workers' revolts. The fact that the expiration of employment contracts and the supportive agitation organized by the trade unions in recent months have sometimes provided more opportunities for demonstrations than the illegal struggles that the workers have engaged in, here and there, since the beginning of the revolt clearly reveals the objective and subjective conditions that were already present. The collective-bargaining agreement was a victory for the labor movement, but it was not *enough*, and today it serves as the bosses' guarantee for social peace, the legal forms of the buying and selling of labor, and the chain that holds the working class to the capitalist class and its functionaries. But now the real struggle, which no longer needs to make demands, is everywhere, because it is in fact a profound movement that raises the social question in its simple truth and no administrative action can dissolve it.

Since these struggles did not at first concern contracts, no one really expected them to end after the contracts were renewed. But these struggles were destined to grow because one could no longer hide the fact that, above all, it was the unions, which made every effort to put the brakes on, that repressed them. In such a situation, the sudden and unannounced strikes called by workers were

¹ *Translator*: distributed in Milan, Turin, Trento and elsewhere on 19 November 1969 by the Italian section of the Situationist International.

already struggles against the unions, which were thus forced into the necessity of increasingly difficult efforts at recuperation, because the workers already knew that their new revolts had to fight against them. The radical actions that were carried out by the workers at Fiat and Pirelli in September, which were the first modern, destructive riots against the commodity and labor in the history of Italy, were also isolated actions that would not have spread if it were not for their exemplary power. With their terroristic falsifications and their monopoly on communication, the trade unions isolate every struggle from all the others, and isolate every worker from the others. In every sector, the unions pursue partial struggles in which they determine the goals and maintain police control. Very clearly, the unions want to keep the workers asleep with an endless series of struggles that do not change anything, and they try to get the workers to accept half of what they demanded, without ever admitting it, even after the most combative actions. If the workers' movement today wants to win on the entire front of its demands – which is what gives the unions some strength at the moment – this is because, getting rid of the illusions of the last twenty years, this movement wants to prove itself able to go beyond them. And this already contains the rationale for getting rid of all the unions.

Today the situation is sufficiently advanced because the unions are often forced to abstain from following the workers onto their terrain; they simply deny the existence of the workers' actions, but these actions are still quite revolutionary because they expel the unions from this terrain, simply by denying any credibility to any representative power. Such a situation cannot last and, in any case, is faced with the alternative of increasing or fading away (due to the combined powers of repression and negotiations that wear down the majority of the workers in exhausting struggles that end with more concessions being made, and possibly due to the formation of a "popular government" supported by the so-called Communist Party, which will try to defend the old world if it can demonstrate its faithfulness to the bourgeoisie). To the extent that a precarious *peace* still exists, the workers learn to make use of unions such as the Social Security Agency without having any illusions about what they are doing, but, to the extent that the situation unavoidably slips into civil war, the initiative decisively passes to the workers. Not only would they learn how fragile the semi-automated system of production is, but they would also rediscover themselves, their class, their consciousness, and their consciousness of their practical strength. In one factory after another, the workers would give the signal that they are ready for direct and general attack and that they seek allies among the new strata of proletarianized workers. Because they are deprived of methods of communication, the proletarians would recognize each other through their actions. And the consequences of their actions would push them forward.

The most profound meaning of the current struggles, in which the workers try to clash openly with their enemies but most often find themselves confronted with “their” unions, is that these struggles upset the balance of the Cold War between the workers and the union bureaucracies. In order to perfect the social organization of appearances, for which, in the current crisis, they provide the best material support, the unions ask that the “provocative” presence of the police at “peaceful labor disputes” be *hidden*.

In their dreams, the unions imagine themselves, along with the so-called Communist Party, “rendering the police useless” by becoming police officers themselves, and in Parliament they want, “in the name of workers,” to purchase the disarming of the police by disarming the proletariat.

In order to exist, the unions need the existence of capital and the State, while the interests of the workers, because they are the producers of all of society’s wealth and are therefore its rightful owners, lies in the abolition of capital and the State. Playing at being “extremists” at the head of a movement that is far more radical than they are, the unions are able to claim that they have *asked* for the most that can be demanded from capital, but they never put its existence into question. The unions, reformist by their very nature, remain the best support for employers who have become reformist in their turn. Thus, the political and unionist bureaucracies are not workers’ organizations that have become decayed or traitorous; they are the mechanisms by which workers are integrated into capitalist society, which is a society based on private or nationalized property, commodities and salaried labor.

The unions’ program is to chase after the class struggle, every day proposing a weak surrogate for it and, to do so, they can never too openly disavow the actions of the rank and file, but must select from, appropriate and pretend to increase their demands. In short, through a seeming transformation of social conditions, the unions [try to] bribe the workers with handouts disguised as conquests and break their revolutionary force, momentarily making their survival in such conditions tolerable and comfortable. All of the problems of the unions and the Stalinist bureaucrats can be reduced to their miserable preoccupation with maintaining themselves while, at the same time, maintaining their “bargaining power,” but to do so, they are forced to take all kinds of risks to be able to present themselves as the exclusive “representatives” of the workers, and this at the very moment when the rank and file is making “representation” increasingly difficult by removing the only justification for it. The workers see that each new day is worse than the previous one and that they have to be seriously concerned about their future.

Their struggles and their perspective are not limited to Italy, but are international. On 30 May 1968, during the occupations movement in France, the

situationists,² in an appeal to the workers, wrote, “those who have already rejected the laughable agreements that satisfied the union leaders will discover that they cannot ‘win’ more with the framework of the existing economy, but that can *take* everything by transforming its basis for themselves. The owners cannot possibly pay more, but they can disappear.”

There is no need to invent or spread illusions about the immediate possibility for complete success. The revolutionary movement of the proletariat has returned a half-century after being annihilated by its determined bureaucratic and bourgeois enemies. But at the beginning of modern revolutionary struggle, it is important to show *the maximum* for which it must *immediately* aim and the terrain on which everything will be in play. From now on, the workers must manage, in the factories and everywhere else, to take the floor to speak on their own behalf and *say what they want*. But to do so, they will quickly discover that they will first need to create, through their autonomous action, the concrete conditions (which do not exist today) that will allow them to speak and act, and that they must overthrow the existing conditions.

The greatest danger, which we should not fail to denounce here and which today appears along with the *danger* of autonomous struggle by the workers, is that the unions, seeking out uncertain support, will appropriate the proclivity for direct democracy expressed by the rank and file and illusorily adopt its methods (meetings that ratify decisions that have already been made, referenda, control of production, etc.). The concessions that some sectors have already won and that the others will eventually win are designed to slow down the process of the class struggle, but will not, in any case, immobilize it (cf. the “global solution” proposed during the agreements at FIAT-Mirafiori signed on 26 June). The maneuver of the unions, working in conjunction with the economic directors and capitalist planners, to make the workers *participate* in their own exploitation – offered in the form of a pseudo-control over production that would increase the *pleasure* they take in producing more – was unsuccessful from the start, because it was the ownership of the means of production that was in question. Workers should not have to co-manage businesses with their owners, but should manage both society and their lives without any bosses at all. The “extremism” and “democracy” of the union bureaucracies – like the neo-Bolshevik revolutionary groups that fight only to be their replacements – do not deceive power or the majority of revolutionary proletarians. The proletariat [only] leaves itself in the hands of its “leaders” when it has more confidence in them than in itself. The proletariat is revolutionary or it is nothing: if it is revolutionary, it is the class that has the future in his hands; but

² *Translator*: this statement was issued in the name of the Enragés-Situationist International Council for Maintaining the Occupations.

when it is not revolutionary and becomes a simple accessory of the machines, it is part of the [fixed] capital that is forced to involuntarily serve [its owners] at every moment of its daily life.

If we must wait and yet be active, the *insufficient* minimum will be nothing other than promoting, supporting and extending the agitation (it is not difficult to give basic examples or emulate them: insubordination against all hierarchies; sabotage of machinery and commodities; practicing radical subjectivity; wildcat strikes; organizing in factories); connecting and radicalizing scattered struggles; taking the floor wherever it is possible and useful to support, disseminate and implement these ideas and necessities; consciously opposing the unions and their attempts to falsify democracy and the workers' co-management of capitalist firms; opposing all recuperators, intellectuals, priests and students, and their ideologies; and organizing ourselves in autonomous groups and promoting basic communication. And when only the best will do:³ the permanent occupation of all the factories, from which all the union leaders and managers have been expelled; [the location of] all power in the workers' assemblies; the organization of self-defense; the election of revocable delegates who act in accordance with the mandates of the assemblies and who are thus responsible to them; and [the making of] appeals to all workers. The rest will be done by the path embarked upon and by collective creativity.

Comrades, the true result of the spontaneous struggles of this period is not immediate success but the extension of the workers' growing consciousness and self-organization. The level reached by the class struggle already expresses the need and, at the same time, offers the conditions for the formation of revolutionary workers' organizations within the proletariat. The degree of autonomy that the workers will be able to attain will decide the fate of their movement. Such a process will lead to the formation of Workers' Councils, which will be connected by means of delegates who are revocable at any moment, and which will become the only deliberative and executive power in the country. As soon as they arise, the proletariat will find in itself the content and the means of its emancipation. In Battipaglia, between 9 and 10 April, as part of their insurrectionary struggle, the workers already experimented with their first attempts at a Council. In Turin, during the Councilist movement of 1920, a manifesto addressed "to the workers and peasants in all of Italy" proclaimed,

³ *Translator*: the title of an editorial note published in *Internazionale Situazionista* (the journal of the Italian Section of the Situationist International), #1 July 1969. It is a détournement of a tagline by Benson & Hedges, the British cigarette manufacturer.

The struggle for conquest must be carried out with the weapons of conquest and not with those of defense. A *new* organization must develop as the direct antagonist of the owners' governing bodies; it must then spontaneously arise in the workplaces and unite all the workers, one and all, as producers, who are subjected to an authority that is foreign to them and from which they must liberate themselves (...) This is the beginning of freedom for you: the beginning of a social formation that, spreading rapidly and universally, will enable you to eliminate the parasites and power brokers from the economic field and to become the owners, the owners of your own machines, your own work, your own lives. . .⁴

The perspective of the absolute power of the Councils of all workers does not come at the end but at the beginning of the movement. Self-management of the struggle is the indispensable premise for the self-management of a new society. The demand that all the means of production and communication become the collective property of the workers who are organized in accordance with direct democracy is the only demand that contains all of the others and also the one that the bourgeoisie and the State will never grant because doing so would mean their total expropriation, that is to say, the end of class rule, and thus can only be attained by the social revolution.

PROLETARIANS, DO NOT STOP HERE. ONE MORE EFFORT IF YOU WANT TO BE THE OWNERS OF YOUR OWN LIVES. THE EMANCIPATION OF THE WORKERS MUST BE THEIR OWN DOING OR IT WILL BE NOTHING.

⁴ *Translator*: this passage from this manifesto (originally published on 27 March 1920) had previously been quoted in René Riesel's text "Preliminaries on Councils and Councilist Organization," which was published in *Internationale Situationniste* #12 (September 1969).