

June 1953 Proletarian uprising in East Germany



Reality of proletarian struggle versus workerist myths

June 2023

nosotros.proletarios@subvertising.org

nosotros ★ proletarios

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IT WAS ON JUNE 17TH, 1953. Important sectors of the proletariat rose up in East Berlin before this revolt spread all over the “German Democratic Republic” and was repressed by the intervention of the Red Army (red with insurgent proletarians’ blood).

We will not here, in this short text, develop in detail how this movement expressed itself. We only insist on drawing the main forces and weaknesses, which historically recur from one struggle to another despite the particular conditions that make emerging such a struggle at a place and a moment, and not at others. Our goal is not to tell a story but to draw programmatic lessons from previous struggles for the future insurrections. Nevertheless, we invite comrades to read Cajo Brendel’s booklet “1953: The Working Class Uprising In East-Germany” (which was one of many sources of inspiration) despite the fact that we have reservations about the ideological framework (i.e. councilism) of this militant and that we criticize in the course of the present text.

This uprising, some weeks after Stalin’s death, put back on the forefront of history the visceral antagonism that opposes two social classes with antagonistic and contradictory interests and programs. And this, whatever shape the bourgeoisie takes to contain proletarians. Because it’s always with force that the proletariat imposes its existence of a class which is deprived of all and its necessity to put an end to this old world, whatever the nature of the facade restoration may be or the colour (red, white, brown...) used to repaint our exploitation. At the strongest moment of the counterrevolution, whereas our enemies robbed our flags, whereas their state proclaims itself to be a “workers” one and they pretend to manage us in the name of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” (which in fact never existed and was replaced by their dictatorship over the proletariat), it’s the internal contradictions of the social relation that make class struggles re-emerging.

The strength of this uprising is to have practically debunked all the big myths of “real socialism” on which the bourgeoisie built its local model of capitalist management. This model of accumulation was, for several decades, the strongest answer of Capital (considered as a global unicity) to the most important wave of struggles (1917-21) imposed by the proletariat up to now. Against this kind of model that imposes the defence of a “socialist homeland”, a “socialist camp” in front of an outside enemy, against this model that imposes sacrifices to “build socialism” and to balance the expectations of the Plan, against all these really existing myths since they are the realization of our exploitation, the proletariat could not answer but with its class weapons: i.e. strike, sabotage, uprising.

The workers’ uprising that began on June 17th 1953 actually marked a shock for all the factions of the bourgeoisie, in the East as well as in the West. Facing the enormous power of the (Bolsheviks’) state and party, the insurgent proletarians can only appear as crazy. Crazy because they attacked this self-proclaimed

“workers” state, crazy because it seems “insane” to destroy what belongs to them, crazy because the struggle itself cannot be lived from the outside otherwise than like an “irrational” action. But for the proletariat that rises up, everything takes place according to other norms than for citizens who didn’t join them yet.

Despite the lead screed that masks our struggles, despite the war slaughters and the total imposition of social peace, it’s always the proletariat that re-emerges. Atomized and defeated proletarians are always determined by historical circumstances and social development. If nowadays our class can appear indifferent, apathetic and submissive, tomorrow it can rise up (it will rise up!) and show the greatest audacity. Our movement of abolition of the social order doesn’t have anything to see with an any rigid snapshot, but it’s the laws of social development that provoke this turmoil so much feared by all the managers of our misery. The struggle against exploitation and against the condition of working-class life is included in the development of capitalist relations. As this struggle takes the character of an insurrection or a revolution, this law of social development emerges at the forefront and destroys radically all the myths and illusions.

The events (in 1953 as well as any time) show how small groups of workers fighting against the deterioration of their work and survival conditions transform in a short time into a class, into a collective being (with its strengths and its weaknesses, contradictorily) acting for much wider and more radical objectives. In such a revolutionary process the initial demands change very quickly and mottos of the moment are out of date and replaced shortly after by more radical watchwords. In the class struggle the important thing is not so much what proletarians imagine about their own action, but what they represent and what they have to do inevitably. Even if the fact that the real movement of the proletariat does not match the flags it carries, and even if this will always constitute a weakness, a lack in re-appropriating the invariant program of destruction of Capital’s community. We are not fetishizing flags or demands put forward, we are able as dialecticians to grasp the whole extent of the contradictions that animates this complex being that is Capital, and therefore also the proletariat as variable capital determined by the social relation. The said proletariat ultimately determines itself not as a simple object anymore, but as a subject of its own history. We therefore don’t follow flags, but the revolution will overcome only the day when the real movement will recover its real flag, will re-appropriate the totality of its program, i.e. communism...



Even then, as always, all the leftist factions try to really discredit the struggle led by proletarians in East Germany in June 1953, while categorizing it as a spontaneous action. All what these fetishists of forms and categories fundamentally learn from this movement, as so many other movements, is its spontaneous

explosion and the formal materialization of the struggle. If we recognize the spontaneous character of all movement and uprising of our class, we are not partisans of “spontaneism” for all that. That is to say that a strong element of class struggle (the ability of the proletariat to rise up spontaneously because confrontations of interests resulting in capitalism itself), we don’t transform it into a weakness of this one. We don’t separate the spontaneity of the proletariat from the totality of its tasks, and therefore also from its necessity to get organized and to centralize its action, once “the spark of the struggle” set ablaze the old world.

Because even a spontaneous movement, in order to increase its efficiency, always tends towards the necessity to organize it so that it surpasses itself. “The one doesn’t advance moves back” according to the saying. The same applies to the expression of all the social forces. To be limited to the first proletarian angry outbursts, it’s already denying its genuine substance. Ultimately the needs of the struggle impose to put on the agenda the process of constitution in force of our class, the need to get always more strongly organized, to break the myth of the rigid snapshot of the movement. It’s the violent opposition to the state, to the existing order that tends towards the constitution of two poles cleansing themselves and ready to clash each other much more violently, until one gets the upper hand over the other. The weakness of the proletariat has always been the lack of organization and centralization tending towards this purpose to destroy completely this system that it attacked in practice.

The uprising of June 1953 had to face more than 30 years of counterrevolution during which all the bourgeois factions worked away furiously, since the ebb of the struggles, at removing from the forefront of history the workers’ small groups that tried to maintain the program of our class. The task of the bourgeoisie was to cut off the new generations of proletarians from the previous ones, those who lived the revolutionary process of the years 1917-21, to cut the red thread that unites us to the struggles of the past and so to prevent us ensuring the continuation of class struggle. From Social Democratic Party to Nazis and Stalinists, all of them were accomplices while practically murdering all the active workers, who were survivors of the greatest wave of struggles. And this without counting all the “Ancients” who died on the battle fields, who were killed in concentration camps or crushed under the bombs of terrorist air raids of the allied air force.

But nevertheless, some active minorities continued against the current to maintain the invariance of the program of world revolution, against all the councilist stories praising the spontaneity of the proletariat. The revolutionary movement creates its own organizations as a conjunction of two moments: groups of determined proletarians emerge from the struggle taking place before our eyes, and stand with other minorities that continued their militant activities once the ebb of the struggles imposed itself as a reality. The revolution never emerges from a blank ground. Even in the worst counterrevolutionary periods the proletariat is

never dead. The struggle never starts from zero, but each movement of our class develops again, and especially reaches a qualitative leap, from the experience of previous movements. There is a past and accumulated experience, lessons drawn by the proletariat. The action of minorities and vanguards (and we reject here any Bolshevik conception of this reality) is precisely to carry these lessons drawn from the past, and armed with these critiques, to lead the revolution towards its full and ultimate realization. When in June 1953 workers of the Leuna factory decided to strike, some “old” comrades who fought in 1918-21 got involved and brought their experience to the “new generations”. No fragment of this earth is beyond the influence of this reality: everywhere the proletariat clashed with its hereditary enemy in furious fights, everywhere there is a collective memory of our class. As an old struggling song of the time said: „In Leuna sind viele gefallen – in Leuna floss Arbeiterblut“ (“In Leuna many fell – in Leuna workers’ blood has flowed”). (Let’s remind that Leuna factory was in 1920-21 an important bastion where the intensity of class war has been written in letters of fire in our memories. Most of these proletarians got organized within the KAPD and the revolutionary “Unions”, outside and against parties in the traditional meaning, outside and against trade-unions...)

There is therefore indeed a collective experience, a consciousness forged through struggles, a class memory, timeless property of the proletariat, drawing lessons from past experiences. “Blank” proletarians, without any past, without struggle, without experience, rebelling “spontaneously”, without link with the other struggles, it only exists in the traumatism of our present modernists and other councilists.



While praising spontaneity (and while turning therefore into “spontaneism”), while fetishizing the form “council” (as other Social Democrats have a fixation about the form “party”, representing a form in itself and not a content of subversion of this world), “councilism” (as an ideology and therefore as a material force) can obviously only ignore, or even worse disparage, all authoritative and dictatorial attempts of the proletariat to get organized as a class and therefore as a party. (Let’s emphasize very clearly here that all authority and dictatorship that the proletariat should exercise will be that against exploitation, against the tyranny of value and rate of profit, as well as against the state of capitalists) If of course, the existence of a self-proclaimed “party” or “vanguard” is not a sufficient element (it’s the lesser we can say), or even a necessary element, for a proletarian movement to emerge, the needs of the struggle will encourage always more proletarians to get organized, to get centralized, to spread and internationalize this struggle, for fear of seeing it to fail. Against the organization of the bourgeoisie as a class, as a party and as a state for defending and reproducing the capitalist social relation, and its wage slavery, the proletariat can only answer through its

organization “as a class and therefore as a party” to put an end to the negation of our humanity. The proletariat constitutes itself as a class, not for surviving as the bourgeoisie does but to materially empower itself for self-negating as a class, and thus to abolish all the classes and therefore class society... The proletariat constitutes itself as a party, that is not a party in the traditional and bourgeois meaning, because in this society, there is a confrontation to the death between two antagonistic parties: on one hand “the party of order” as Marx said, and on the other hand “the party of anarchy”, i.e. the revolutionary proletariat... And finally, the proletariat constitutes itself in full force to confront the capitalist State, organizing and asserting itself as a counter-State, as an anti-State... Against white terror we must answer with red terror. Against the bourgeois project of conserving the old world, we have to oppose the proletarian counter-project of subverting and destroying the old world...

It's all this, it's the re-appropriation of our historical program that the proletariat is determined, and must be strong enough, to impose to the world. And suitable means must correspond to this goal. Against this necessity of the struggle, the “councilists” can only oppose us their insipid praises of a massive movement, its spontaneity and formal organization of the proletariat in mythical “workers’ councils”. These councils are obviously a MOMENT of the struggle, a necessity of the organization and an expression of workers’ associationism. It's through and for the struggle that workers, from atomized and individualized citizens they are who are set rigidly in the death of labour and industrial jails, recover their genuine humanity, merge in a collective life plan and prepare the ground for enforcing the death sentence pronounced by history against this age-old nightmare. But, these workers’ councils are not a guarantee of the “purity” of the movement. Once the necessities of the struggle impose other formalizations of the proletarian party, the previous structures must disappear, as the snake slough its skin for another one to grow...



The uprising of June 53 developed around several strong main lines of the struggle. Going even beyond the formalisation of structures set up by the proletariat, some elementary measures have been taken. Strikes are imposed by force if necessary; insurgents didn't wait to rally the majority of workers in a factory to occupy it, to stop machines and to dictatorially decree the strike. And this, in a practical way, against councilism, democratism, assemblyism where the force of the proletariat, the force of the struggle gets weakened and dissolves in the democratic consultation and grovelling before the wish of “the majority”. Against all this poison, minorities of proletarians get therefore organized as a force.

Not only strikers started to organize and centralize their actions so that they are more efficient, so that they spread, but they break more and more localism and

regionalism for each time try to centralize the struggle more strongly. So the strike committee in Bitterfeld called thus to a country-wide general strike and showed thus its wish to impose the strike not locally, but all over DDR, to lead the movement at its strongest level. Alas, the proletariat remained marked by gigantic weaknesses and didn't empower itself in this case to REALLY AND PRACTICALLY to implement what it recommended in words. Nevertheless, the intensity of the struggle shows us that the simple "spontaneity" or even the formal fetishism about the "workers' councils" are not enough to grasp the facts, the struggle of our class. It's this struggle itself, the organization of its extension that pushed minorities to precisely organize the continuity of the struggle. Despite the repression and the imposition of the state of siege (with all the consequences) the proletariat was still able not only to continue the struggle, to start new strikes, but also to continue to spread its movement.

The proletariat in struggle, because of the very necessities of the struggle has to get organized and aims to take into account of all necessary means to the extension of the struggle, and to the more generalized attack to this system of death. Although bourgeois coming from different backgrounds take pleasure in describing us proletarians who "were crushed under tanks which they were trying to oppose unarmed" and who died in "acts of heroism"; although the proletariat must face a gigantic movement of inertia trying to make it rigid, to make it settle down on positions of defence and readjustment (and therefore of backing) of the social relation; despite the deployment of all these material forces at the service of Capital, proletarians started to organize their needs to get armed. Rapid reaction structures (as motorized units) are created to occupy strategic points as quickly as possible. Acts of proletarian terrorism are exercised, like sabotages of "production tools" with explosives, arsons of buildings.

The social contradiction and the importance of the uprising were so that many acts of DEFEATISM ate away the security forces, "Volkspolizei" as well as the Red Army. Disarming and dissolution of repression corps were on the agenda. Numerous units refused to shoot, were disarmed by workers or merely defected to the other side of the social barricade. On several occasions, strikers (like those in Leuna) imposed the disarming of the factory police. Stocks of weapons fell thus into the hands of the insurgents who used them at the height of the insurrection.

Nevertheless, after some days of hesitation, the state got it over and imposed by force and terror, by slaughters and raids in workers' districts, to return to work. The balance of forces was not anymore in favour of the proletariat...

The "classic" measures of any proletarian uprising were taken, such as attack and destruction of jails, unconditional release of ALL prisoners (against all the bourgeois lies pretending that only the "political" ones were released); capture and occupation by workers' detachments of nerve centres of the bourgeoisie: e.g.

strategic centres of communication, radios and newspapers that were used by proletarians to spread their propaganda, etc.

Nevertheless, our class didn't come out of the last decades of bloody counterrevolution and terror unscathed. Numerous concessions were bestowed upon the bourgeois program, gigantic weaknesses continued to slow down and disarm our movement of abolition of the existing social order. Very serious ebbs in the offensive resulted in defensive positions, withdrawals into alleged "benefits" that weakened the force of the proletariat. These tendencies were materialized by some leadership of strike committees that were convinced that the strength of workers was in the workplaces and called proletarians who occupied the streets to go back in their factories to fight there for their demands. This occupation of factories, this confinement into a bastion, into a "red basis", into a territory to defend, this tactics means the ruin of our movement that precisely doesn't have any space to protect. Intense social war doesn't have anything to do with the classic strategies of bourgeois wars.

On the other hand, and as a result of what we wrote before, despite important efforts, the proletariat didn't empower itself everywhere to really spread the struggle. Too often, this extension was just a matter expressing a simple wish, non translated in the practice, at least if we stand at the highest level, that is to say extending the struggle to all the sectors, spreading the struggle all over the country and even beyond the national boundaries. Too often, settling of the movement on positions of readjustment of Capital is prevailing and expresses itself as concessions to democratism, fetishism of massivity and form that would be a guarantee of the purity of the struggle. In Bitterfeld for example, the democratic illusions were so important that there was a proposition of worker participation to the government. This means that at this level of compromising and resignation as for the real tasks the proletariat must assume, our class participated in a non destruction of the state. Where proletarians affirmed with force their non adherence to the "liberal" Western model of management as well as to the "workerist" Stalinist model, the weaknesses occurred in form of concessions to the formal Social Democracy (i.e. the SPD). This one, without being praised to the skies, constituted an alternative still keeping a certain credibility despite all the counterrevolutionary role it played not only since the repression of the revolutionary wave of 1917-21, but also since its birth, since its setting-up...



Nevertheless, despite all these contradictions, all these weaknesses, despite the implacable repression the proletariat was victim after June 1953, the social contradictions, which the workers' resistance emerged from, remain of course. The forces that appeared during the uprising of June cannot be destroyed. As far as any society is based on wage labour, a revolt of its slaves is over the Sword of

Damocles hanging above this society. How such a revolt can occur, the workers of DDR showed it precisely.

As all the local factions of the world bourgeoisie, the SED (the ruling “communist” party at the time in East Germany) has been obliged, with the aim of maintaining social peace and consolidating law and order, to make some material concessions so that the revolt of the proletariat doesn’t re-emerge for quite a while. Expectations of the five-year Plan have been revised downwards, the USSR has cancelled the payment of the balance outstanding of war reparations, it has restored the last enterprises it still managed, it has delivered on credit big supplies of food and raw materials, etc. Some workers saw their wages being increased, and the production of “consumer goods” has been developed. Thus, through their struggles, proletarians of the DDR and the soviet bloc generally speaking have shaken the very foundations of the “socialist” model of accumulation, obliging the local managers of our misery to always take into account our needs as well as the risks hanging over them to sweep out their system. Our struggles mean for the bourgeois to always revise downwards their expectations to accelerate the process of accumulation of the value that always must valorise itself more, but which concomitantly tends to inexorably devalorize. This is what will lead Capital to its ruin through the definitive bursting of its internal and lethal contradictions of which our class is the mainspring of the achievement of its destruction...

Post-scriptum: Cajo Brendel's text we referred to at the beginning of this text is available on <http://libcom.org/library/1953-working-class-uprising-east-germany-cajo-brendel>.



... end of democracy!?