

1825-2025 - Two centuries of class struggle

Unlike many observers, who remain confined to a superficial, immediatist view of the antagonisms between “social groups”, Marxists use their own scientific approach to analyze **class struggle**. In contrast to the prevailing empiricism, they use what Marx and Engels called a “materialist and dialectical conception of history”. In other words, we place the historical perspective and the evolution of socio-economic issues at the heart of our understanding of the reality we face. Consequently, no assessment of the state of class struggle today can do without analyzing it from the beginning of modern capitalism to the present day. At this point, we are in no way distinguishing ourselves from other groups on the communist left who offer their own histories, usually dating back to 1914. However, as the reader will see by comparing the various existing sketches, we consider that the interpretation of the history of the workers' struggle proposed by the current groups of the Communist Left contains a series of errors or approximations. It is this dissatisfaction with proposals for an assessment of the struggle of our class, and the lack of precision among revolutionaries as to what is at stake in the terms “counter-revolution”, “physical or political defeat” and “resumption of the class struggle”, that prompt us to take on this task by proposing a first draft. This article does not claim to provide a definitive answer to the question of how to assess the force relations between the classes. It is an initial framework for analysis, which can only benefit from further development and criticism.

The awakening of the proletariat (1825-1848)

According to Marx, “*modern industry itself was only just emerging from the age of childhood, as is shown by the fact that with the crisis of 1825 it for the first time opens the periodic cycle of its modern life*” (Karl Marx, *Capital* Volume One, Afterword to the Second German Edition, 1873). At the time, the working class was a very small minority of the population, and the differentiation between artisans and workers was still in its infancy. Socialist theories, such as those of the printer Pierre-Joseph Proudhon from Besançon or the German tailor Wilhelm Weitling, were aimed primarily at an artisan audience. Likewise, the major struggles of the first decades of modern capitalism were led by craftsmen in the process of proletarianization, such as the Canuts of Lyon in 1831 and 1834. In addition to the predominance of crafts in this proto-working class, another specific feature of the class struggle at the time was the historically justified alliance between the proletariat and the petty and middle bourgeoisie against feudalism. Thus, the Chartist movement, with its political demands for universal male suffrage and electoral reform, as well as its composition, with a proletarian and socialist left wing around figures such as Ernest Jones and George Julian Harney and a non-socialist right wing around Feargus O'Connor, and its alliance with the petty-bourgeois British Radicals, embodied this strict non-differentiation between proletariat and petty-bourgeoisie. It wasn't until the revolution of 1848 that the two social categories were separated by the barricades.

Make the revolution permanent: the proletariat becomes autonomous and fights for its own revolution (1848-1850)

On the eve of 1848, the numerical development of a proletariat concentrated in major urban and industrial centers, such as Manchester, led to a more strictly proletarian orientation within socialism. It was in 1847, under the impetus of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, that the former League of the Just, with its Christian socialist orientation and a strong artisan membership, transformed itself into the League of Communists. Founded in England, the League was conceived from the outset as an international organization with British, French and German members. The working class was ready to take to the stage when the economic crisis of 1847 led the following years to a sequence of revolutionary struggles across Europe: in Sicily between January and April

1848 ; in France between February and June 1848; in Milan in March 1848; in Poland between March and May 1848; in Denmark between March 1848 and June 1849; in Germany between March 1848 and summer 1849; in Hungary between March 1848 and August 1849; in Austria between March 1848 and November 1849. Proletarians frequently took first place in these bourgeois revolutions, often led by petty-bourgeois or bourgeois leaders such as Ledru-Rollin in France, Mazzini in Italy, Kossuth in Hungary, Hecker and Struve in Germany, Blum in Austria. At the start of the revolutionary wave, Marx and Engels supported the petty-bourgeois Democratic Party, whose mouthpiece in Germany was the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*. Marx was vice-president of a democratic association in Brussels and took an active part in preparations for an armed uprising in favor of the republic in Brussels, donating large sums of money for the arming of Brussels workers. He also took part in preparations for an armed uprising in Cologne, in liaison with the clerical and liberal elements working to separate the Rhineland provinces from Prussia. ⁽¹⁾ For their part, Friedrich Engels and Wilhelm Willich fought on the barricades in Elberfeld in a volunteer corps opposed to Prussian troops. However, due to the events of June 1848 in France, when the petty-bourgeois national guard, frightened by the “reds” and the “sharing”, massacred the revolting proletarians, and the cowardice of the German bourgeoisie, which refused to lead its revolution against the Prussian king, Marx and Engels concluded that the *ad hoc* alliance between proletariat and bourgeoisie was no longer valid, and that it was now a matter of proclaiming “permanent revolution”, i.e. fighting to ensure that, once bourgeois objectives had been achieved, the revolution would continue until it became a proletarian revolution. However, in 1850, noting the stabilization of capitalism after the crash of 1847 and the failure of the revolutionary struggles, crushed by the reactionary Russian and Austrian powers, Marx and Engels identified the transformations in the situation. They understood that the proletariat had been **defeated**, and that a period of **counter-revolution** was underway. Against the immediatist left wing of August Willich and Karl Schapper, who argued for the continuation of revolutionary struggle, Marx and Engels dissolved the League of Communists, ⁽²⁾ prioritize the work of theoretical deepening and count on a new, inevitable economic crisis for a **resumption** of the proletariat's struggle, which would put a definitive end to the counter-revolutionary period.

A victorious counter-revolution, a defeated proletariat and the need to deepen theoretical knowledge (1850-1864)

For the next fifteen years, the European proletariat was unable to assert itself as a class antagonistic to the triumphant bourgeoisie. When it was not unorganized, as in Germany, it was framed by demagogic factions of the bourgeoisie, as in France behind Prince Napoléon-Jérôme Bonaparte and the adventurer Armand Lévy. As a corollary to this historical absence of the proletariat, Marx and Engels placed their hopes in a struggle between the liberal states, England foremost among them, and Russia, and envisaged, albeit provisionally, the possibility of a bourgeois revolution with plebeian and agrarian socialist tendencies in China with the Taiping revolt. ⁽³⁾ The 1853 pamphlet *Lord Palmerston*, denouncing the British statesman's Russophile foreign policy, and Marx and Engels' critical support for the Franco-British-Ottoman alliance against the Russian state during the Crimean War of 1853-1856, should be interpreted in this light. Even more significantly, Marx decided to devote this period of calm in the class struggle to the theoretical development of scientific socialism, and in particular to his masterwork on the critique of political economy,

1 See the section “Preparing for revolution (1847-1848). Marx's party activities: February 1848 to early March 1848” in *The Class Party*, edited by Roger Dangeville, available online at marxists.org (in French language):

2 See Marx's letter of November 19, 1852: “...*On my proposal, the League here dissolved itself and decided that it had no reason to continue to exist...*” (NB : Our translation)

3 See Marx's famous quote: “*When our European reactionaries, in the course of their imminent flight through Asia, finally arrive at the Great Wall of China, at the gates which lead to the home of primal reaction and primal conservatism, who knows if they will not find written thereon the legend: République chinoise Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*”. (*Neue Rheinische Zeitung – politisch-oekonomische Revue* [nr. 2, February 1850](#); Karl Marx, *Literary Remains*, vol.3, pages 444-5).

Capital. Between 1857 and 1863, Marx wrote the first book of *Capital*, the only one he managed to complete.

The return of the proletariat as a revolutionary, internationalist class and the heyday of the Paris Commune (1864-1871)

Marx expected a revolution at the end of the economic crisis he envisaged around 1857-58. In reality, it would be some years before the proletariat re-emerged as a class “for itself”, opposed to capitalism. In September 1864, the International Workingmen's Association (IWA) was founded at a congress held on the initiative of British syndicalists, bringing together militant workers from England, France, Germany and Italy. This was the direct result of several discussions, mainly between French Proudhonists, grouped around Tolain, who had succeeded in defending an autonomous perspective in relation to the Bonapartist Empire, and English syndicalists, around George Odger. In each of these countries, workers' organizations of sometimes confused orientations were formed, proclaiming the need for class solidarity that transcended borders. Karl Marx supported this initiative, to the point of drafting the Statutes and Inaugural Address of this First International, and taking up a seat on the General Council. Throughout Europe, the proletariat demonstrated its solidarity by strengthening its organization and staging a series of strikes. It also proclaimed its solidarity with the struggle of the North American Union, led by Abraham Lincoln, against the secessionist and slave-holding Southern states. Although alien to the IWA, a section of the German working class rallied around one of its first political organizations, the ‘Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein’ (ADAV; General Association of German Workers), founded by Ferdinand Lassalle. In France, between 1869 and 1871, IWA militants such as the Proudhonist Eugène Varlin waged a series of remarkable struggles, winning over ever-wider sections of the working class. When France entered the war against Prussia, and even more so with the proclamation of the Republic in September 1870, the French section of the IWA, alongside the Blanquists, defended a perspective of support for the war on the French side, but on an autonomous basis. This led to the organization of ‘Comités d'arrondissements’ [city districts], centralized in the Central Republican Committee of the twenty arrondissements. With the famous red posters it plastered on the walls of Paris, this organization, along with the Central Committee of the National Guard, played a major role in preparing the ground for the Paris Commune, which arose spontaneously on March 18, 1871. Despite a series of errors and indecision clearly identified by Marx - such as the refusal to seize the French national bank, or the organization by the Central Committee of the National Guard of municipal elections designed to legitimize the Commune's existence instead of launching the offensive on Versailles, allowing the latter to reorganize and reinforce its routed troops - the Paris Commune represents the highest level of proletarian class consciousness since its birth. However, it only managed to hold on between March and May 1871, ending up crushed by the Versailles armies during the Bloody Week. Once again, the proletariat faced a terrible **defeat**, both **physical** for the French proletariat and **political** for the rest of the European proletariat. A new counter-revolutionary period began.

The failure of the Commune ushered in a second counter-revolutionary period (1872-1889).

Once again learning the lessons of the proletariat's defeat, as they had done in 1850, Marx and Engels decided at the IWA's Hague Congress in 1872 to scuttle the organization by transferring its headquarters to New York, to prevent it falling into the hands of Blanquist and Bakuninist confusionist tendencies. Although formally in existence until 1876, the organization no longer played the role of proletarian vanguard, an inevitable consequence of the entry into a **counter-revolutionary** era. The emphasis was once again on theoretical work, with Marx resuming his work on the following books of *Capital*, while Engels studied subjects as diverse as the *Markgenossenschaft*, the history of primitive Christianity and the dialectics of nature. In addition, from the crushing of the Commune Marx and Engels drew the lesson that the period of support for

the wars of nation-building of modern continental states and the internal struggles of the liberal revolution, involving support for progressive bourgeois fractions, was over. During this period, revolutionary minorities continued to carry out the work of organizing the proletarian vanguard, to which Marx and Engels contributed support or critical theoretical distance. This was the case in Germany, where Lassalleans and Eisenachers decided to found a joint organization at the Gotha Congress in 1875, which Marx and Engels considered to have been precipitated and based on a confused program of petty-bourgeois inspiration. These errors once again testify to the weight of counter-revolution on the proletariat. The organization was soon confronted with Bismarck's repression, and was subject to anti-socialist laws from 1878 until 1890. Another symptom of the weakness of the proletariat's class consciousness was the credence given by a large part of the 'Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands' (SAPD ; Socialist Workers' Party of Germany) to the bourgeois theses of an adventurer like Eugen Dühring, forcing Marx and Engels to undertake the task of refuting his theses and reaffirming scientific socialism. In a sign that the counter-revolution was on the wane, a series of Marxist parties began to appear in the late 1870s - early 1880s, such as the Socialist Workers' Party of America in 1876, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party in 1879, the Dutch Social Democratic League, the Social Democratic Federation or the Revolutionary Socialist Party of Romagne in 1881 ⁽⁴⁾, the French and Italian Workers' Parties in 1882, the Belgian Workers' Party in 1885, the Norwegian Labor Party in 1887, the Swiss Socialist Party in 1888 and the Swedish Social Democratic Workers' Party in 1889.

The birth of international social democracy: a reborn proletariat confronted by the poison of opportunism and reformism (1889-1905)

Towards the end of the 1880s, the proletarian struggle **resumed**. As early as 1889, a large number of Marxist-inspired social-democratic organizations - sometimes more formally than really - decided to group together in a new international, under the patronage of Friedrich Engels. After the definitive break with the anarchist wing of the labor movement at the Zürich Congress of 1893, it seemed that the proletariat was now in a position of strength. It strengthened itself through day-to-day class struggle, wresting reforms from the bourgeoisie by developing unitary mass bodies such as trade unions and mutual aid funds, and through revolutionary parliamentarianism. Once organized in its mass, it will be able to seize power, whether by peaceful means, as in England, America, the Netherlands ⁽⁵⁾ or in Germany, ⁽⁶⁾ or by revolutionary means everywhere else. Social democratic parties were led by direct disciples of Marx and Engels, such as the Germans August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht, the Russian Georgi Plekhanov, the French Jules Guesde and Paul Lafargue, and the English Eleanor Marx, William Morris and Ernest Belfort Bax. However, the dynamics of "Belle Époque" capitalism, marked by colonial penetration throughout the world - shared by England, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Belgium and, albeit later, Germany - and by widespread prosperity, began to provoke the emergence of a workers' aristocracy, forming a

4 Historical region in Italy, approximately the south-eastern part of present day region of Emilia-Romagna, including Ravenna and Rimini at the Adriatic coast.

5 See Marx's [speech to the Amsterdam congress of the IWA](#) on September 8, 1872: "You know that the institutions, mores, and traditions of various countries must be taken into consideration, and we do not deny that there are countries -- such as America, England, and if I were more familiar with your institutions, I would perhaps also add Holland -- where the workers can attain their goal by peaceful means. This being the case, we must also recognize the fact that in most countries on the Continent the lever of our revolution must be force; it is force to which we must some day appeal in order to erect the rule of labor."

6 See Friedrich Engels' "[Socialism in Germany](#)" (1891): "This party [the Social Democratic Party] today has reached the point where it is possible to determine the date when it will come to power almost by mathematical calculation" (...) "How many times have the bourgeois called on us to renounce the use of revolutionary means for ever, to remain within the law, now that the exceptional law has been dropped and one law has been re-established for all, including the socialists? Unfortunately we are not in a position to oblige messieurs les bourgeois. Be that as it may, for the time being it is not we who are being destroyed by legality. It is working so well for us that we would be mad to spurn it as long as the situation lasts. It remains to be seen whether it will be the bourgeois and their government who will be the first to turn their back on the law in order to crush us by violence. That is what we shall be waiting for. You shoot first, messieurs les bourgeois."

political and trade-union bureaucracy, and secreting its own ideology, reformism. Explicitly formulated by Engels' former disciple, Eduard Bernstein, this doctrine asserts that, with the relatively peaceful development of capitalism, all revolutionary prospects are to be rejected, in favor of a democratic and progressive path to socialism - in reality, state capitalism. This attempt to revise Marxism immediately provoked a reaction from the Marxist center and left, in the person of August Bebel, Karl Kautsky and, above all, Rosa Luxemburg with her book *Social Reform or Revolution?* The quarrel was officially resolved in favor of Marxist orthodoxy at the Hanover Congress in 1899. In reality, far from being a deviation, Bernstein's reflections merely assumed and systematized the aspirations of this aristocratic stratum of the proletariat, dominant in the mass parties and unions. This reality was obscured by the Russian revolution of 1905, which turned social democracy to the left.

The Russian Revolution and mass politics: the upsurge of the proletarian masses and its repercussions on the International (1905-1907)

The Russian Revolution began in January 1905, following the bloody repression of a workers' delegation led by the priest Gapon to present its demands to Czar Nicholas II. Throughout the year, a revolutionary climate swept Russia, fueled by Russian defeats at the hands of Japan, with whom the Czar had been at war since 1904. The methods of struggle, combining unitary and political characteristics, that would characterize the proletariat throughout the 20th Century were developed for the first time: mutiny by mariners, with the famous example of the battleship Potemkin, mass strikes, constitution of the Saint Petersburg Soviet, presided over by Trotsky, insurrection in Moscow in December 1905. The left and center of the International, especially Kautsky, were enthusiastic about this revolution, which seemed to represent a turning point. The possibility that the overthrow of the Czarist autocracy could signal the start of a worldwide, or at least European, socialist revolution was now clearly in the air. But this left-wing domination was short-lived. With the failure of the Russian revolution, social democracy was finally able to accept its true nature.

The illusion of a dominant proletariat framed by tested social democracy (1907-1914)

According to Trotsky, it was from 1907, the start of the counter-revolution on a Russian scale but with political repercussions extending to the European labor movement, that social democracy completed its integration into the bourgeois camp. Behind the illusion of a proletariat perceived as a dominant force in Europe, confident in its "old and tested tactics", with mass parties and unions at its disposal, lies in reality a colossus with feet of clay. Yet even the Marxist left found it difficult to perceive the fragility of this edifice, with the exception of the Left Radicals, grouped around Luxemburg and Pannekoek, who were more directly confronted with the political and trade union bureaucracy. Thus, when Lenin took part in the controversies opposing European social democracy, he always supported the Kautsky center, which he considered the authentic representative of Marxist orthodoxy. This is how tenacious the illusion was, reinforced by the congresses of Stuttgart in 1907 and Basel in 1912, where internationalist resolutions were passed, affirming that any declaration of war would be threatened by the strength of the organized proletariat. But the resolutions were of little weight in the face of the accelerating forces of history. Social democracy collapsed without a fight on August 4, 1914, when the French socialists joined the 'Sacred Union' and their German counterparts joined the 'Burgfrieden' (political truce). Although not physically **defeated**, the proletariat was nonetheless faced with an immense **political** defeat. The vast majority of its mass organizations, parties and unions, revealed their integration with the bourgeoisie, and masses of proletarians, exhilarated by the promise of an easy victory, left for the front... with flowers in their rifles ..., convinced that they would be back home, victorious, by Christmas.

Revolutionaries against the tide and a politically defeated proletariat (1914-1917)

At that time, only a minority of the old Marxist left were aware of the disaster and the need to radically re-found the bases of the workers' movement, by breaking with the old social democracy, returning to original Marxist ideas - particularly on the question of the state - and updating their tactics for the new period ahead, variously seen as the period of imperialism (Lenin and Luxemburg), of the decadence of capitalism (Bukharin and Trotsky), of state capitalism (Bukharin) or of the entry into the era of mass action (Pannekoek). As the French title of the book written by Lenin with his lieutenant, Grigory Zinoviev, *Against the Current* expresses it, the ideas expressed by revolutionary Marxists were in the minority, and the proletariat, behind its respective bourgeoisie, was not yet in a position to fight the war and put into practice the watchwords of revolutionary defeatism. Things began to change as the war entered its fourth year. In February 1917, under the primary impetus of proletarian women, Czarism was overthrown by a broad mass movement bringing together proletarians, peasants, soldiers and a section of the bourgeoisie who felt the tide turning. In France, it was the carnage resulting from the Nivelle Offensive that prompted soldiers to mutiny, a symptom of the growing rift between soldiers and the bourgeoisie. The apotheosis of 1917, marking a clean break with the previous three years of political defeat for the proletariat, saw the Soviets, led by the Bolshevik Party, seize power in October-November. This ushered in a worldwide revolutionary wave, particularly in Europe.

A revolutionary wave that shook the bourgeoisie (1917-1923)

During the debates surrounding the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (February-March 1918), all the Bolsheviks were betting on a widespread revolution in Europe in the near future. The most optimistic envisaged a revolution in the weeks to come, while for the others, it was a matter of months. This was no collective hallucination. As early as January 1918, mass strikes took place in Austria and Germany, while the Reds proclaimed the Socialist Workers' Republic of Finland. A few months later, in October 1918, the mariners of Kiel rose up, marking the fall of the Second Reich and the beginning of the German revolution. These events precipitated the end of the war, with the signing of an armistice on November 11, 1918. The revolutionary wave is undeniable: Swiss general strike and revolution in Alsace-Lorraine in November 1918; Spartacist uprisings in Berlin in January and March 1919; Republic of Councils in Bavaria in spring 1919, in Hungary between March and August 1919, in Slovakia in summer 1919; Ruhr workers' uprising against the Kapp-Lüttwitz putsch in March-April 1920; factory occupations in Italy during the Biennio Rosso of 1919-1920; insurrections in Argentina in 1919-1921; March action in Germany 1921; German October in 1923. On numerous occasions, the bourgeoisie was on the verge of toppling. Carried along by this wave of struggles, revolutionaries decided, under the impetus of the Bolsheviks and despite the opposition of the Spartacists, for whom this foundation was precipitate, to proclaim the birth of a third International, the Communist International (CI), in March 1919, in the euphoria of the Hungarian and Bavarian revolutions. In 1920, with the Red Army's invasion of Poland and "*The fate of world revolution is being decided in the west: the way leads over the corpse of Poland to a universal conflagration*", as General Mikhail Tukhachevsky put it, the Second Congress of the CI continued to envisage a short-term victory for the revolution. The revolutionaries were soon disappointed. At the Third Congress, held in 1921, Lenin and Trotsky defended the idea of a relative stabilization of capitalism. Indeed, capitalism had managed to overcome the post-war crisis, while at the same time the bourgeoisie had succeeded in crushing the revolution, particularly in Germany, Italy and Hungary, thanks to its social-democratic wing. The Bolsheviks drew the wrong conclusions from a correct assessment. Rather than calling on their supporters in the rest of the world to follow the path of the Bolshevik Party, i.e. the formation of vanguard parties, smaller in numbers but committed to the Marxist method and the uncompromising defense of the revolutionary program, they sought a shortcut: conquering the masses through the united front and the merger of Communist parties with the left wing of social democracy. This reinforces the

opportunism already present in the CI, with its support for national-democratic struggles and the prospect of conquering the trade unions. This is a powerful factor in the decomposition of the revolutionary movement, as demonstrated by the failure in 1923 of the German October, due to the defense of the strategy of a “workers' government” by the KPD and the left of the SPD.

“Midnight in the century”: entering the counter-revolution (1923-1939)

The slowdown and subsequent failure of the revolutionary wave had a direct impact on the party in power in Russia: the exhaustion of the Russian proletariat, the bloody repression of the Kronstadt insurgents [1921], the elimination and integration of factory committees in the unions, reducing the Soviets to a mere recording chamber for party decisions, tactical retreats with the NEP [idem], the increasingly pronounced integration of the Soviet Union into the concert of imperialist nations following the Treaty of Rapallo [1922], opportunism in the Bolshevik party, the bureaucratization of the party, the state, the soviets and the trade unions, and so on. All this led to the passage of the majority of the party, united behind Joseph Stalin, to counter-revolution. Far from being an ideological quarrel, the adoption of the theory of “socialism in one country” signified a break with world revolution and a perspective focused exclusively on building state capitalism in the Soviet Union, the defense of which became the new objective of the Communist International. All genuine revolutionaries opposed to this evolution were progressively sidelined and politically broken, prior to the physical elimination that followed in the 1930s with the infamous Moscow trials. Although the communist lefts tried to resist, notably in Russia, Italy and more broadly in the CI, they were unable to prevent the counter-revolutionary orientation, dominant since the Bolshevization begun at the CI's Fifth Congress in 1924, from wrecking the British General Strike of 1926 and, even more so, the Chinese Revolution of 1927, crushed by Chang-Kai Chek's Kuomintang, which the CI's Stalin-Bukharin leadership called on to support until the last moment. All hopes placed in this struggle, which had the potential to revive the revolutionary wave, were thus dashed, and a long and painful counter-revolutionary period began. It's “*midnight in the century*”, in the eloquent words of Russian revolutionary Victor Serge. The political defeat of the proletariat contributed to the victory of Fascism, particularly in Italy and of Nazism in Germany, adding to this political defeat a real **physical defeat**. Faced with a disoriented proletariat, framed by social-democratic, national-communist and even fascist parties, the only political survivors of the wreckage of the CI were the small fractions of the communist left. Analyzing the characteristics of the period they faced, they identified its counter-revolutionary nature and deduced, the Italian Left in particular, that without a combative reaction from the proletariat, the bourgeoisie would be able to impose the ‘sacred union’ again and a new world war, necessary to reshuffle the cards after the division of the world to Germany's disadvantage, following the Entente's victory in 1918: confiscation of all German colonies and its entire merchant fleet, iron ore and coal production reduced by 80% and 30% respectively, grain and potato production cut by a quarter, confiscation of a fifth of its territory and 10% of its population, and so on. But the long-awaited reaction never came. Despite workers' strikes in Belgium (1932) and, above all, in France (June 1936), and the heroic insurrection of the Catalan proletariat (July 1936), the influence of Stalinism and Social Democracy on the working class, and the myth of anti-fascism and the Popular Front, led to a reinforcement of the ‘sacred union’ and to the enlistment of the proletariat behind its national bourgeoisie. Nothing could stop the bourgeoisies from going to war in September 1939.

The dashed hopes of a new October (1939-1944)

In this gloomy period for revolutionaries, only one hope remained: that of a repetition of the Russian revolution, namely that the prolongation of the war, with its terrible trail of death, shortages and increased exploitation, would lead the proletariat to take up the path of revolution again, turn its weapons against the bourgeoisie and embark upon the insurrectional road to seizing power. For a brief moment, history seemed to repeat itself. The workers' strikes in northern Italy in 1943, which

forced the Fascist Grand Council to dismiss Mussolini in order to regain control of the situation, convinced the Italian fraction abroad to disband and join the new party founded in 1943 by Onorato Damen and his comrades: the Internationalist Communist Party. However, this overlooked the fact that the proletariat had entered the war physically and politically defeated, which explains why its reactions at the end of the war were too weak to be able to sustainably repel the counter-revolution. The weight of the Stalinist party and the myth of anti-fascism and partisanship led to a decline in workers' struggles, which were replaced by partisan warfare on an inter-bourgeois terrain. Nor were the German desertions, fraternizations and mutinies of 1944 enough to offer a revolutionary way out of the war, and the Second World War led to a new division of the world. Counter-revolution still had a bright future ahead of it.

Outbreaks of proletarian struggles in a counter-revolutionary course (1944-1965)

In hindsight, the counter-revolution begun in 1923 had never ceased. The social-democratic, Stalinist and leftist parties, and the trade unions that served as their transmission belts, continued to frame the proletarian masses and frustrate their struggles, whether in the East, where the factory councils set up by Polish and Hungarian workers were taken over by the state following the occupation by the Red Army, or in the West, where the CPs defended the “battle for production”, or in the Third World, where the local Stalinists crushed the Saigon Commune. At the same time, the mechanisms of the social state in the West enabled a relative pacification of the proletariat. However, even in counter-revolutionary times, class struggle **never** disappears (see the graph of the strike index 1902 – 2012 at the end of this article). There were isolated but vigorous episodes of struggle throughout the second post-war period. This period was marked by heroic struggles, such as in East Berlin in 1953, and in Hungary and Poland in 1956, which were ferociously crushed by the Red Army of the “big Soviet brother”. In the West, the struggles gradually began to take the form of wildcat strikes and spontaneous struggles that subverted the union framework, as in Nantes and Saint-Nazaire in 1955, Belgium in 1960-61, and the struggles of British miners. So May '68 didn't break out like a bolt of lightning in the blue sky.

1968, a historic break during a decade of renewed class struggle? (1965-1975)

The decade from 1965 to 1975, culminating in May '68, saw a resurgence of class struggle in the contemporary history of proletarian struggles: a massive general strike in France (1968), a “hot autumn” in Italy with wildcat strikes and factory occupations (1969), and a proletarian struggle in Czechoslovakia (1968), once again crushed by the Red Army. The symptoms of 1968 extended to Latin America, with struggles in Mexico City or Cordoba in Argentina, and to Africa, notably in Senegal. Everywhere, and even more so in the early 1970s, the proletariat seemed to be self-organizing and fighting outside the shackles of the trade unions. Wildcat strikes became widespread, and it was during this period that social struggles reached their peak in the second half of the twentieth Century. Likewise, the communist lefts were enjoying renewed interest from new generations of students and workers, resulting in the birth of new groups and the strengthening of old ones. Both **qualitatively** and **quantitatively**, these struggles seem to represent a turning point compared to previous decades, to the point where some see them as the end of counter-revolution. But is this really sure? As struggles declined from 1975 onwards, revolutionary organizations suffered a militant hemorrhage and were plagued by crises, while at the same time petty-bourgeois myths of spontaneity, third-worldism and self-management flourished and took hold of the most radicalized elements of the proletariat, particularly among young people, specialized workers and immigrants. The Stalinist monopoly on the working class and the trade union framework, reinforced by the fact that the vast majority of the Western working class was hoping above all to benefit from the fruits of the “Thirty Glorious Years”, thus appear to have been only temporarily shattered. In retrospect, the “1968s” appear to have been a historical **parenthesis**, an abortive attempt to break with the counter-revolutionary course.

The end of the historical parenthesis (1975-2022)

The defeat of the Polish proletariat in 1981 is symptomatic of this retreat of struggles. Although some struggles continued throughout the 1980s, they remained dramatically isolated, such as the heroic struggle of the miners in the UK in 1985. This situation, which had already recurred in the 1930s, 1950s and 1960s, does not mean that the proletariat has emerged from its period of **defeat**. The proletariat has never managed to reach the level of consciousness it had in 1917-1923, and to build a revolutionary organization on an international scale, such as the League of Communists and the three Internationals. What's more, the collapse of the Eastern bloc, which in other circumstances might have represented a point of support for the proletariat, has, on the contrary, only served to reinforce disillusionment and the blows dealt to class consciousness. The 2000s saw new mystifications guiding the proletariat: this was the era of anti- and then alter-globalism, highlighted by the anti-WTO movement in Seattle in 1999 and the anti-G20 movement in Genoa in 2001. The younger, more combative generations seemed to be abandoning the workers' struggle and the communist perspective in favor of defending a more humane, social and ecological form of capitalism. As for the Great Recession of 2008, far from highlighting the increasingly obvious bankruptcy of capitalism in the eyes of proletarians, it only strengthened citizen movements such as Occupy Wall Street, the Indignados and Nuit debout. Everywhere, the citizen is substituted for the proletarian, while the struggle of the 99% against the 1% replaces the class struggle. Hopes placed in the exploited masses of the Middle East, who led a series of political revolutions in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria, soon proved to be dashed, as genuine anger was diverted onto an exclusively bourgeois and democratic terrain. At no time, neither qualitatively nor quantitatively, did the level of struggle approach that of the 1965-1975 period. With the proletariat disoriented, and the bourgeoisie clinging to power despite ever more obvious examples of capitalism's bankruptcy (crises, wars, ecological catastrophe), the situation continues to be guided by the counter-revolutionary solution that imposed itself in the mid-1920s.

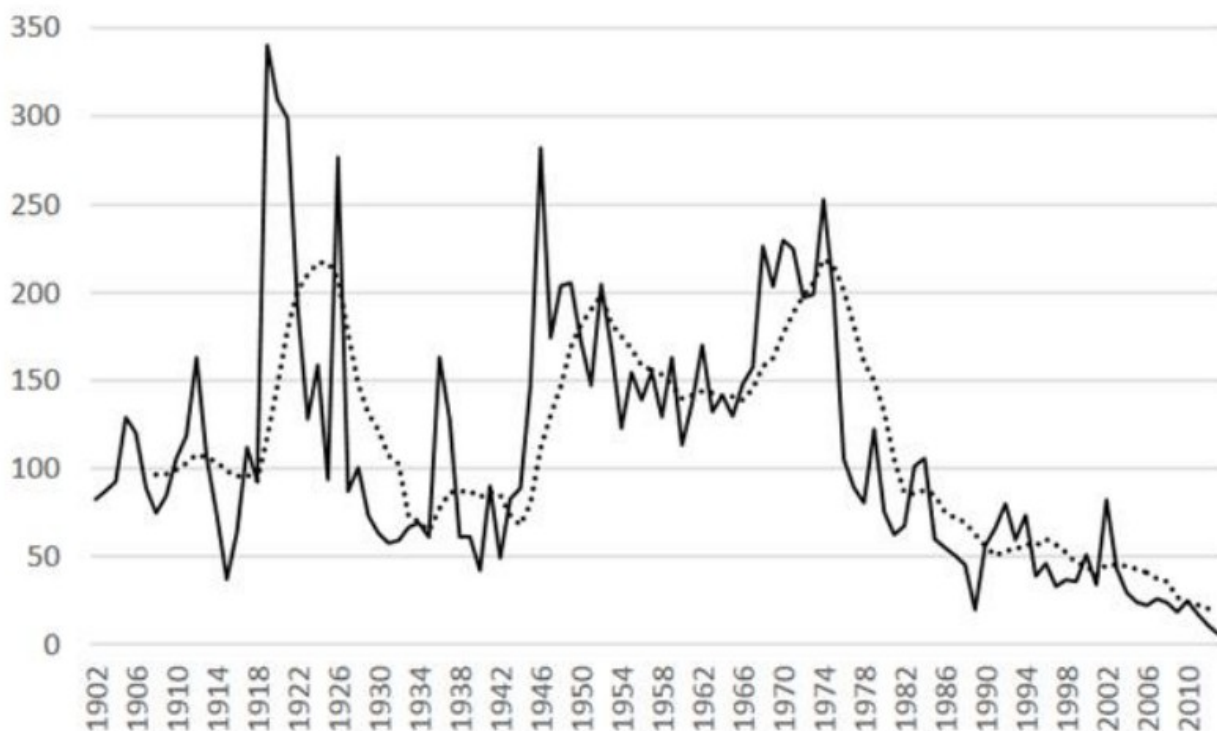
Definition stakes

In the light of these two centuries of class struggle, and in order to better understand the current situation, it is important to clarify notions that are as frequently used as they are poorly defined. We need to distinguish between the following configurations: **counter-revolution and defeat (physical or political)** of the proletariat, **episodes** of class struggle, **resumption** of class struggle and **revolution**. Marx and Engels identified two episodes of counter-revolution, i.e., the **physical** and **political defeat** of the proletariat in its attempt to overthrow the bourgeoisie: after 1850 and after 1871. The first lasted around fifteen years, the second around twenty. In both cases, it was a **physical** defeat, with the elimination of tens of thousands of proletarians, and a **political** one, with revolutionary organizations and class consciousness temporarily disappearing and being reduced to small revolutionary minorities (for example, the historic "Party" with only Marx and Engels as members and their scattered supporters, with whom they maintained an epistolary correspondence). The Marxist left has identified a third situation of counter-revolution with the political defeat of the proletariat when it entered the war in 1914. This was a defeat without a fight. The proletariat, framed by social democracy, lacked class consciousness and was incapable of imposing its perspective. Finally, the communist left has identified a fourth counter-revolutionary episode from 1921-1923, marked by both **physical** defeat at the hands of Stalinism and fascism, and **political** defeat, with the passage of communist organizations into the bourgeois camp and an absence of perspective for the proletariat, framed by the democratic myths of anti-fascism, popular fronts and partisanship. Are we still in this period of counter-revolution? To answer this question, it's important to distinguish between sometimes **heroic** and **qualitatively** elevated **episodes** of class struggle, and the historical **resumption** of that same struggle, which alone has the potential to repel counter-revolution in the long term. Even in periods of **counter-revolution**, the reinforced exploitation of the proletariat produces important episodes of class struggle: the Chinese revolution of 1927, the

insurrection of the Spanish proletariat in July 1936, the Italian strikes of 1943, the East Berlin uprising of 1953, the struggle of the Hungarian councils in 1956. In these episodes, the proletariat manifests itself as a class “for itself”, irreducibly opposed to the bourgeoisie, but is always confronted by the weight of counter-revolution, manifested by the absence of genuine class consciousness and, dialectically, of revolutionary organizations leading a significant part of the vanguard. As the notion of **episode** indicates, the notable difference between these struggles and a historical revival lies in their **depth** and **duration**, as well as in their relay within the emergence of a **revolutionary organization** at international level. The strength of the proletariat can only be measured by the evolution of the force relations over the medium term. While periods such as the Italian strikes of 1943, which produced the Internationalist Communist Party, and even the 1965-1975 decade, which saw the development of numerous wildcat strikes and revolutionary minorities, revealed an obvious potential, historical hindsight leads us to conclude that these struggles were no more than a **parenthesis**, i.e., that the proletariat's **tendency** to impose its revolutionary perspective was ultimately **broken**, due to a still unfavorable force relation. Conversely, **revivals** manifest themselves not only in **numerous** struggles based on the proletariat's **autonomy** from the bourgeois “workers” unions and parties, but also in a lasting **growth** in the **class consciousness** of the proletariat and its vanguard organizations, a prerequisite for revolution, which constitutes the **final point** of this revival of struggles. This was the case from 1848, with the League of Communists; from 1864, with the birth of the IWA; from 1889, with the birth of the Second International; and from 1917, with the emergence of Communist parties and their centralization in the Third International. However, we have not witnessed similar events since 1923. It is on the basis of such criteria (massiveness of the struggles, radicality and autonomy of the struggles, depth of class consciousness, strengthening of the revolutionary organizations, all over a relatively **long period of time**) that it is important to determine, on a scientific and not an immediatist basis, whether we are truly witnessing a historical **revival** or **rupture**.

Monbars, August 2024.

English translation by the author. Proofread by H.C. Revision of October 7, 2024



Strike index in 16 Western countries : USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, France, UK, Italy, Norway, Austria, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Japan.