

## **From Left Radicalism to Council Communism: Anton Pannekoek and German Revolutionary Marxism**

**John Gerber**

The severe post-war political crisis in Germany during the years 1918-21 was the context for the emergence of a widespread network of workers' councils which made a spectacular if rather ineffective challenge to the existing state apparatus. While the majority of these councils were dominated by the social democrats and did not express any aspirations beyond the establishment of a democratic republic within the framework of capitalism, there developed at the same time, within this broad council movement, a specific current of council communism with clear revolutionary and anti-capitalist goals. At its high-point in 1919 and 1920, this movement represented a powerful anti-bureaucratic Marxist alternative to the rapidly consolidating Leninist communist movement. The most articulate theorization of revolutionary council communism was provided by the Dutch Marxist theorist Anton Pannekoek, who had a long career of activism in both Dutch and German social democracy.<sup>(1)</sup> As a leader and activist in the socialist movement in Bremen in the years before the first world war, Pannekoek played a key role in shaping a distinctive radical movement which ultimately became the ideological and organizational centre of the emerging council communist movement. Although left radicalism in Bremen represented one of the two poles around which the early German communist movement gravitated and exemplified what was, perhaps, at the heart of the west European revolutionary Marxist tradition, few historians have paid much attention to this movement or attempted to trace its evolution into council communism. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to describe and analyse the development of the left radical movement in Bremen from its origins shortly after the turn of the century to its rapid demise as a form of council communism in the period after 1920. Specifically, it will be argued that the precise form this movement took was the result of the intersection of Pannekoek's active theoretical reflections with a distinct set of socio-economic conditions affecting the Bremen working class, a series of concrete political experiences and active political struggles by the local social democratic movement, and a specific conjuncture of historical events. In a more general sense, this analysis will also show a high degree of continuity between the pre-war and post-war forms of radicalism and demonstrate the existence of a radical class-consciousness among a large segment of the Bremen working class, which arose from a deeply rooted and permanent sense of alienation and served as the driving force of left radicalism in Bremen.

An astronomer of international renown, Pannekoek joined the

Dutch Social Democratic Labour Party (SDAP) in 1899, while a doctoral student at the University of Leiden. Shortly after becoming a Marxist, Pannekoek began a prolonged intellectual inquiry into the relationship between Marxism and philosophy, which laid the methodological foundations for a conception of Marxism that was unique on the theoretical spectrum of the Second International. What differentiated Pannekoek's theorizing from the mainstream of social democracy was his concern with the question of *Geist*, or more precisely the role of subjective factors -class-consciousness, ideas, will, morality, and solidarity -in social development. Building on the philosophical concepts of the German autodidact philosopher Joseph Dietzgen, Pannekoek maintained as early as 1901 that the material world and the world of consciousness constituted an inseparable entity in which each reciprocally conditioned the other.(2)

Without deprecating the importance of material elements, he stressed that the revolutionary struggle was an ideological process shaped by the gradual and diffuse flow of ideas and life experiences. Proletarian revolution, from Pannekoek's stand-point, represented a victory of the mind, of historical understanding, and revolutionary will. The consciousness of the proletariat was as much a factor affecting historical evolution as the material factors from which it arose. It followed from these assumptions that, for Pannekoek, the subjugation of the working class was not entirely due to economics and force alone, but in no small measure to the 'spiritual superiority of the ruling minority' which 'presides over all spiritual development, all science'. Through its control over institutions such as schools, the church and the press, the bourgeoisie 'contaminates ever-larger proletarian masses with bourgeois conceptions'. Pannekoek, anticipating many of the main themes of the later theory of ideological hegemony made famous by Antonio Gramsci, argued that this 'spiritual dependence of the proletariat on the bourgeoisie' represented the 'main cause of the weakness of the proletariat'.(3)

Pannekoek's initial political perspective was shaped in large part by his experiences within the left wing of Dutch social democracy. Like the left elsewhere in Europe, Dutch socialism was torn by a conflict between Marxists and revisionists. What distinguished the conflict in Holland, however, was the crystallization of a separate radical Marxist faction during the years 1901-03. The lines of factional cleavage were first drawn in 1901 and 1902 over the question of the proper application of Marxist principles to agrarian and educational policy. The decisive historical experience for the Dutch left, however, was the Dutch mass strike wave of 1903, which prompted them to look increasingly to spheres of political combat which superseded the conventional party, trades union, and parliamentary forms of organization and struggle. The intra-party debate culminated in 1909 with the formation of the left radical Social Democratic Party, which in 1918 became the Communist Party of

Holland.(4)

Pannekoek's collaboration with German social democracy began in 1901 when he entered into regular correspondence with Karl Kautsky. Starting in 1904, Pannekoek began to write regularly for both the *Neue Zeit* and the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*. Two years later, upon the invitation of Kautsky and August Bebel, Pannekoek temporarily abandoned his promising career in astronomy to move to Berlin to teach in the newly formed SPD central party school. Pannekoek's teaching career, however, ended abruptly after only one term when the Prussian government barred him from teaching on the grounds of non-citizenship. During the next four years, Pannekoek remained active in German social democracy as a freelance journalist, book review editor of the *Neue Zeit*, and a travelling lecturer. Pannekoek resumed his Marxist educational work in April 1910 when he moved to Bremen to establish a local SPD school. His appointment marked the culmination of a long informal relationship with Bremen social democracy. His first contact with the movement had been in September 1905 when he was invited to lecture in Bremen. The relationship deepened the following year when Pannekoek taught at the Berlin school with the Bremen SPD leader Heinrich Schulz. During the course of the next few years, the *Bremer Biirgerzeitung* became one of the most regular outlets for his theoretical writings, which in turn played a critical role in defining the political perspective of Bremen social democracy.

In Bremen, Pannekoek found himself within a bastion of the German revolutionary left, to whose inchoate radicalism he helped give a coherent structure. During his four years in Bremen, Pannekoek taught over 400 students - rank-and-file party and trades union activists for the most part - who played a key role in defining the political direction of left-wing radicalism in Bremen during the turbulent political struggles of the next decade (5) As a result of Pannekoek's extensive organizational and ideological work, the Bremen left emerged, in the eyes of one historian, as 'the best anchored grouping of the extreme left wing of the Social Democratic Part (6)

The nature of the local economy had a powerful conditioning effect upon the development of a left-wing social democratic movement in Bremen. During the period 1890- 19 10, Bremen experienced a rapid process of industrialization and urban growth which transformed the city from a commercial centre into a stormy industrial metropolis. Between 1888 and 1907, the number of industrial workers increased fourfold, from 8,463 to 33,825. Economic growth from the mid-1890s onwards was concentrated largely in the technologically advanced and highly monopolized shipbuilding industry, which swiftly became the mainstay of the city's economy. In 1895, this sector of the economy ranked seventh with 849 workers; by 1907, it had reached

second place with 5,633 workers, a rise of 563.5 per cent. The growth of the shipbuilding industry acted as a further stimulus to growth in several other advanced industries. Between 1888 and 1907, the number of workers employed in metal processing rose from 2,381 to 3,465 (or 45.5 per cent); in textiles, from 1,304 to 2,073 (or 58.9 per cent); in the printing trades from 748 to 1,059 (or 41.6 per cent). Economic growth was also reflected in the highly concentrated nature of capitalist enterprises in Bremen. In 1907, 66.3 per cent of the work-force in the shipbuilding and machine-building industries worked in shops with more than 200 workers; 13.1 per cent in shops with 51 to 200 workers; 12.1 per cent in shops with 11 to 50 workers; and only 8.5 per cent in shops with less than 10 workers. Two shipyards alone accounted for 3,830 workers. The working class itself was composed largely of semi-skilled male workers, most of whom had migrated to Bremen from elsewhere and had little in the way of a craft union tradition upon which to draw. By 1907, 57.5 per cent of the work-force had been born elsewhere. A further factor defining the socio-economic character of Bremen was the low working-class standard of living. In 1906, the aggregate income of the Bremen working class, which constituted two-thirds of the population, was twenty million marks less than the aggregate income of the wealthiest 2.6 per cent of the population. (7) Taken together, these socio-economic factors combined to create an unintegrated, volatile, and permanently aggrieved work-force, whose inchoate radicalism shaped the course of Bremen social democracy.

Until 1903, the socialist movement in Bremen was dominated by a reformist group led by Friedrich Ebert, which had its base in the craft unions. Throughout 1903 and 1904, internal tensions within the party built up rapidly, resulting in the crystallization of separate reformist and Marxist factions. This train of developments began in October 1902, when Heinrich Schulz became editor-in-chief of the *Bremer Bürgerzeitung*, which gave the left a powerful mechanism for defining the political direction of the movement. A former teacher, whose Marxism was shaped largely by ethical and humanitarian considerations, Schulz had been a longstanding opponent of the traditional line of Bremen social democracy. Schulz's principal collaborator on the *Bürgerzeitung* was the former cigar-maker and autodidact, Alfred Henke, who sought to infuse the paper with a radical Marxist spirit. The first opportunity to promote a radical Marxist tactic came during the 1903 Reichstag elections, when the *Bürgerzeitung* campaigned against a proposed SPD alliance with the Liberals. A second issue of demarcation arose in the autumn of 1903 over the question of how locally to implement the condemnation of revisionism that had been pronounced at the Congress of Dresden. The first major victory for the Marxists came in 1905, when the local party rejected participation in a liberal educational society. It was this defeat that prompted Ebert to leave for Berlin. These issues, however, were dwarfed by the mass strike debate of the summer of 1905, in which the left's position

prevailed.(8)

While these controversies were significant in defining the radical position, they were not decisive in the consolidation of a radical majority. What was crucial was the left's growing influence in a number of key institutions of social democracy in Bremen. Next to their control of the *Bürgerzeitung*, the left's main source of influence was in the local secretariat which had been created in May 1906 to administer the day-to-day affairs of the party and was firmly controlled by the radical carpenter Wilhelm Pieck. An indefatigable organizer who combined the qualities of a bureaucrat and an agitator, Pieck almost single-handedly built up a strong base for the radicals in the industrial districts of Bremen. Within a few weeks of taking office, Pieck had increased party membership from 3,912 to 5,610.9 A third source of radical influence lay in the party's extensive local educational programme which had been developed by a group of radical teachers to radicalize rank-and-file trades union militants. In firm control of the *Bürgerzeitung*, the secretariat, and the party's educational programme, the left by 1906 was in a position to disseminate its radical conception of Marxism to the rapidly-growing membership. Prior to Pannekoek's arrival in Bremen in April 1910, however, the Bremen left's vision of revolutionary Marxism was as yet vague and their strategy barely worked out. Their conceptions were largely those of a militant, intransigent Marxism, which stressed an unrelenting opposition to capitalist society in all its forms and an active strategy of confrontation.

In the formulation of the basic strategic perspective of the Bremen left, Pannekoek was joined by two other key activists who became prominent in the years after 1910: Karl Radek and Johann Knief. Karl Radek, who played a role second only to Pannekoek in the formulation of the Bremen left's strategic perspective, had a long career in both Polish and German social democracy. Radek's special talents lay in journalism, which found expression in countless articles for the *Bürgerzeitung*. Johann Knief, a teacher from a working-class background, began his political career as an activist in the social democratic faction of the Teachers' Federation and later became political editor of the *Bürgerzeitung*. Upon Pannekoek's arrival in Bremen, Knief almost immediately became his closest friend and political collaborator. Politically, Pannekoek and Knief maintained a 'teacher-pupil' relationship; Knief later acknowledged that Pannekoek had been the dominant political influence in his life.(10)

Pannekoek's significance for the theoretical development of the Bremen left became immediately apparent in the aftermath of the Prussian suffrage demonstrations of February 19 10. Starting in April 1910, Pannekoek carried the issues raised by the demonstrations into the pages of the *Bürgerzeitung*, articulating for the first time a new theory of mass action, which almost immediately became the strategic cornerstone of left radicalism in Bremen. (11)

In a theory which paralleled, but was completely independent of, the similar theoretical formulations of Rosa Luxemburg, Pannekoek argued that revolutionary strategy must be centred around a

continuous and expanding series of extraparliamentary actions ranging from ordinary street demonstrations to the general strike. These actions would serve to educate, collectivize, and strengthen the proletariat for the coming struggle for power, while simultaneously weakening the foundations of the capitalist state. In Pannekoek's view, the main rationale for these actions lay not in their objective aims, but in their subjective impact on the consciousness, solidarity, and morality of the working class. The conclusion Pannekoek drew from this was that socialism could not emerge from the gradual attainment of a parliamentary majority, but only from the steady erosion of the bourgeois state and the simultaneous creation of a proletarian counter-state through the process of mass action.

Pannekoek broke new ground in Marxist theory when he maintained that new working-class institutional forms would arise in the course of the mass struggles and by supplanting existing bourgeois institutional forms would provide the framework for the future socialist state. For the first time, a Marxist theorist was prepared to assert that the essence of socialism lay not in the future state but in the process of socialist transformation itself.

Pannekoek's theory of mass action was underpinned by a substratum of ideas about the role and limitations of traditional working-class organizations and the relationship between leaders and followers. He argued that the key issue confronting the socialist movement was the contradiction between the will to struggle of the masses and the inability of the party and trades union leadership to give expression to that will. He felt that because of the bureaucratic nature of the traditional working-class organizations, the leaders were far less radical in terms of basic revolutionary perceptions and insights than the masses of workers. Unlike the workers, whose thoughts were derived from perceptions of collectivity, the party and trades union leaders could think and reason only in terms of themselves.

Pannekoek's criticism of traditional working-class organization was derived in part from a lengthy controversy with the German trades union leadership. Pannekoek defined the parameters of this conflict shortly before he arrived in Bremen in an article entitled 'Social Democratic Non-commissioned Officers', in which he characterized the struggle between leaders and rank and file in the trades union movement as an 'irreconcilable opposition between revolution and authority, between subversion and order'. Drawing upon military metaphors, Pannekoek advanced the proposition that the trades union bureaucracy represented a key consolidating agent of capitalism: 'There is a deep contrast between the masses and their leaders. . . The social democratic non-commissioned officers do what the Prussian non-commissioned officers cannot do; they quiet the unruly masses, accustom them to discipline, and divert them from

revolution.' Pannekoek argued that this 'corruption of the movement' represented the 'main hope' of the bourgeoisie.(12)

Pannekoek's critique of the trades union bureaucracy was brought home to the local working class by a series of events which occurred during a bitter three-month-long strike by dockers and shipyard workers in the autumn of 1910. The strike itself began as a response to a lock-out in Hamburg, but its origins were traceable to several years of progressive deterioration in working conditions in the shipyards, involving wage cuts, lengthening of the working day, and speed-ups, which were a consequence of growing foreign competition in the shipbuilding industry.(13\_ Although the Bremen trades union leadership tried in vain to prevent the strike from spreading to Bremen, the pent-up resentment of the workers could not be held in check and strike fever spread rapidly throughout the shipyards. After three months of hard struggle, the executive of the metal workers' union attempted to call the strike off, having achieved no tangible concessions from the employers. This decision unleashed a storm of protest from the rank and file. In Bremen, a mass meeting of the metal workers' union, held to vote on the agreement, turned into a stormy confrontation between strikers and union officials, forcing the leadership to call an abrupt halt to the proceedings. When another meeting was held several days later, the agreement was rejected by a vote of 1,748 to 1,177.(14) Although the agreement was eventually pushed through by the executive, it left discontent smouldering among the rank and file. From a political standpoint, the strike left a dual legacy: the strike experiences both served as a special ideological reference point for the organizational politics of left radicalism in Bremen and helped solidify the ties between the local working class and the radical SPD leadership.

When the executive of the metal workers' union later attempted to defend its policies at a public forum by charging that the masses were 'capricious, unreliable, and incapable of making important decisions', Pannekoek responded by contending that the trades union bureaucracy had induced a psychology of passivity and deference to authority among workers. Instead of instilling class-consciousness, the union leaders had only helped reproduce capitalist ideological hegemony. He concluded that cleavages of the type which had emerged during the shipyard workers' strike were an 'inevitable and necessary' dynamic of revolutionary development. (15) To help democratize the movement, he drafted a proposal calling for the formation of independent shopfloor organizations chosen directly from the workers themselves, which would be able to convey the mood and will of the masses and 'form the ideal organs to lead and build political mass strikes'.(16) Although Pannekoek did not, at this point, use the term 'workers' councils', the main elements of council organization were clearly present in embryonic form in this proposal. The issues posed by the shipyard strike were revived with even

greater intensity during a second shipyard workers' strike in July and August 1913.(17) In contrast to the earlier one, this was a wildcat strike organized and conducted expressly against the wishes of the union leadership. Once again, the strike was precipitated by events in Hamburg, where 18,000 shipyard workers spontaneously staged a walk-out to force their employers to negotiate. (18) Within a few days, the strike movement spread to Bremen, where 9,000 workers staged a similar, spontaneous walk-out.(19) Almost immediately, the trades union leadership initiated a campaign to deny the strike official recognition and began to invoke harsh disciplinary measures against the strikers. In the end, the strikers were forced to accept a settlement which led to the blacklisting of several thousand of the most militant workers.

Pannekoek again attempted to put the strike in theoretical perspective by arguing that the wildcat strike tactic represented the essence of proletarian struggle in the epoch of imperialism. He warned that traditional trades union discipline could only be used to limit the mass struggles of the future. The conditions for victory, on the other hand, required the very qualities that bureaucratic leadership sought to suppress in the masses: their revolutionary energy, solidarity, and willingness to sacrifice themselves. (20)

For Pannekoek and the Bremen left, the first world war marked a new stage of political development, in which they moved rapidly from being radicals within the social democratic tradition to being revolutionaries outside of it and against it. Although forced back to Holland by the war, Pannekoek continued to exert, through his writings and personal contacts - in particular his close friend Johann Knief - a decisive influence on the political development of left radicalism in Bremen.

Once back in Holland, Pannekoek immediately began the painful task of analysing the failure of social democracy and developing a strategy for the future. The capitulation of the Second International to nationalism, he argued, was due to the gigantic 'spiritual weakness' of the movement, which had its roots in the appropriation of initiative from the masses by a growing bureaucratic apparatus. In contrast to other leaders of the left such as Lenin and Trotsky, Pannekoek stressed that this failure was not the result of treacherous leadership, but an objective consequence of the unsuitability of the old movement and old tactics for the epoch of imperialism. In place of the trades-union and party-centred socialism of the pre-war era, Pannekoek called for a 'new socialism of the labouring masses' based on - as yet undefined - new structures of direct proletarian power. (21) But for the present, Pannekoek felt that nothing could be done except to prepare the workers ideologically for a break with the SPD and for the formation of a completely new type of workers' movement.(22)

For the Bremen left, the first year of the war was a year of confusion and despair. It lost its more prominent leaders: Pannekoek returned to Holland; Knief was mobilized and sent to the front; Radek was forced to leave for Switzerland. At the same time, many of their working-class supporters were drafted. As a consequence, the left swiftly lost most of its positions of influence in the party and trades unions.(23)

The first step in building an organized anti-war opposition came in January 1915, with the creation of a discussion circle for selected activists within the Bremen SPD. To help develop a praxis for the anti-war movement, the circle immediately embarked on a systematic study of Pannekoek's theoretical writings. The circle received a major boost in the autumn of 1915, when Knief was able to resume his political activity after being discharged from the army following a nervous breakdown. Almost immediately, Knief began to rebuild the left's extensive network of shop-floor militants and lay the groundwork for mass action against the war.(24)

Knief also established a widespread network of national and international contacts which helped make the Bremen left a vital force within the European revolutionary left. Through Radek, close ties were forged with both the Zimmerwald left and Lenin and the Bolsheviks. In Germany, a particularly close relationship was established with Julian Borchardt and his publication *Lichtstrahlen*, which served as a major outlet for the writings of Pannekoek, Knief and Radek. The most important ties, however, were with the Hamburg group of left radicals led by Wolffheim and Laufenberg, whom Knief had brought to a Pannekoekian position. Relations with the Spartacist group in Berlin, led by Rosa Luxemburg, by contrast, were strained, due to a combination of longstanding pre-war animosities and deep-seated strategic differences over the nature of the coming revolutionary movement.

A major turning-point in the development of the anti-war opposition in Bremen came with the creation -following extensive consultation with Pannekoek -of the review *Arbeiterpolitik* in June 1916.(25) The defined aim of *Arbeiterpolitik* was to provide the workers with a 'new spiritual orientation' and liberate them from the 'stultifying power of the organizational bureaucracy of official social democracy'. Its main themes were clearly Pannekoekian in character. It stressed repeatedly that the SPD, through its bureaucracy and base in the labour aristocracy, had become a new 'social-imperialist party' fully integrated into the capitalist system. Unlike the Spartacists, they felt that the vital question was not one of reforming the SPD, but of drawing sharp new demarcation lines for the coming epoch of workers' power.(26) Under the editorship of Knief and Paul Frolich, and with major intellectual contributions from Pannekoek and

Radek, *Arbeiterpolitik* swiftly emerged as the leading theoretical organ of the German revolutionary left.

Following the expulsion of the anti-war opposition from the SPD in the spring of 1917, the Bremen left intensified its efforts to build a new type of revolutionary party. Shortly before the national conference of the expelled anti-war opposition at Gotha in April 1917, the Bremen left organized a caucus of the left to reach agreement on a common strategy. The Bremen group and its Hamburg allies, along with the Borchardt group and Spartacist supporters in various cities, favoured a new party of the left, but were opposed by the majority of Spartacists and the Dresden left, who favoured uniting with the centrists. When the majority of Spartacists joined with the centrists to form the USPD, the Bremen left accused them of attempting to restore the 'old leader politics' and withdrew to continue their efforts to form a separate anti-bureaucratic revolutionary party of the left.(27)

The events at Gotha gave a powerful impetus to a discussion over the precise form of the new organization. From their Pannekoekian perspective, the Bremen left maintained that the old forms of party and trades union organization were unsuitable for the revolutionary upheavals expected in the future and called for new, direct instruments of revolutionary struggle. The model they envisioned was inspired in part by the American Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Familiarity with the IWW came from the Hamburg left radical leader Fritz Wolffheim, who had edited an IWW publication in the United States, and from the activities of American IWW sailors in the ports of Bremen and Hamburg. In March 1917, Wolffheim published a proposal for a new type of 'unitary organization' ('Einheitsorganisation'), combining the functions of party and trades unions. His underlying assumption was that the centralizing and cartelizing tendencies of imperialist capitalism could be combated effectively only by a loose, class wide network of factory level organizations, struggling directly at the point of production (28)

Encouraged by a series of strikes and demonstrations in Bremen and throughout Germany during the spring and summer of 1917, Knief formed an action committee out of several local groups, which issued a formal call for the creation of a new organization that was 'not a leader party' but an instrument for 'bringing into being a new form of political life'. In response to this call, thirteen delegates gathered illegally in Berlin on 26 August 1917 for the foundation congress of what was officially termed the International Socialists of Germany (ISD). Although the ISD was proclaimed a 'unitary organization', its exact structure was deliberately left vague on the assumption that its precise form would develop organically out of the struggles of the future.(29)

The German Revolution of November 1918 gave the Bremen left

the long-awaited chance to test its radicalism in practice. Although the ISD (which became the International Communists of Germany -IKD -in late November) had played only a limited role in the revolution in Bremen, the party was prepared to move decisively in the days which followed. Through its control of the former SPD organization, its extensive network of factory militants, its long experience of political struggle, and its rapport with the local working class, the IKD was well placed to seize the revolutionary initiative(30)

Drawing heavily from Pannekoek's theoretical analyses, which appeared weekly in *Arbeiterpolitik*, the IKD adopted a strategy of radicalizing the revolution and building a form of council power(31) In December, the IKD began to organize mass demonstrations in support of a council republic and joined with the USPD to form a local Red Guard.

The hopes aroused by the revolution were also sufficiently strong to galvanize the IKD and the Spartacists to put aside their differences and unite to form the Communist Party of Germany (KPD). But the proceedings of the unification congress held in Berlin from 30 December to 1 January clearly revealed that the fundamental differences between the two main currents of German communism still had not been resolved. The principal dividing-point involved the nature of the new organization itself. The Spartacists favoured a centralized and hierarchical organization, while the IKD called for a loose federation of autonomous local groups united only by a kind of 'spiritual unity'. This merged into the related question of whether to continue to work within the existing trades union federations or attempt to form new 'unitary organizations'. In order to head off a serious controversy, Rosa Luxemburg intervened to have the two questions referred to a special commission. The most controversial debate, however, involved the question of whether to participate in the forthcoming national assembly elections. Despite formidable opposition from Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, an IKD motion opposing participation was passed by a majority of three to one.(32)

The KPD's first test of strength came within days of its formation, in the abortive revolt that has gone down in history as the Spartacist uprising. In Bremen, events took a different course when -following an IKD-led armed demonstration -a council republic seized and held power for three weeks. This action was in part a tragic misunderstanding based on the assumption that the events in Berlin marked the beginning of the second revolution. But behind this seizure of power lay weeks of propagandizing by the militants of the left on the need to proclaim a form of council power. Despite the great determination of the left, the council republic's existence was precarious from the start. Its three weeks of tenuous rule were marked by new levels of political activism and demonstrated

widespread support for the revolutionary aspirations of the left, but they also revealed the inability of the left to develop a coherent revolutionary strategy that went beyond rhetoric and symbolism.(33)

Defeated in its attempt to radicalize the revolution, the KPD undertook a major reassessment of its strategy that lasted throughout much of 1919. This reassessment led to a major tactical debate between the two currents of German communism, in which Pannekoek became a major participant. The first shadows of conflict were cast in June 1919 when Paul Levi, who had assumed the leadership of the KPD after the death of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, attacked the Bremen and Hamburg organizations for their lack of discipline. Levi considered the left to be largely responsible for the KPD's defeat and felt that the party's first task was to restore authority through centralization. Levi also reasoned that the only way the KPD could escape its isolation was to adopt parliamentary tactics, rid itself of its left wing, and seek to attract the 800,000 members of the USPD.(34)

The former IKD left, for their part, tenaciously held to their Pannekoekian position that a transition to socialism was possible only on the basis of new, anti-bureaucratic forms of organization and a complete break with the politics of the Second International. Throughout the summer and autumn of 1919, a renewed discussion of the question of revolutionary organization dominated internal party life in Bremen. From this discussion, the former IKD left emerged more convinced than ever that the party must become a decentralized federation devoted to propagating the ideas of 'unitary organization' and the council system. Its views were summarized in a programme drawn up by Pannekoek, which became the focus of a heated debate at a national conference of the KPD in August 1919.(35) Shortly after the conference, Levi launched a full-scale assault on the left, which culminated in its expulsion at the KPD Congress of Heidelberg in October 1919.(36) Levi's expulsions had grave consequences for the KPD. Almost overnight, the party was reduced from an estimated 107,000 to 50,000 members. (37) The KPD's strongest sections, those in northern Germany, the Rhineland, parts of Saxony, and virtually the entire Berlin section, all joined the expelled opposition.

Once the smoke of factional battle had cleared from Heidelberg, the expelled left opposition began the task of redefining its organizational practice. The most immediate and pressing question was whether or not to form a new revolutionary party, and, if so, what the nature of the new party would be. This question was first confronted at a national conference of the opposition in Bremen on 30 October 1919. The proceedings revealed three main currents of opinion. The Hamburg group, led by Wolffheim and Laufenberg, favoured the immediate formation of a new anti-bureaucratic party. Another

group, centred around Otto Riible of Dresden, sought to dispense with the party form of organization altogether and to work exclusively within local 'unitary organizations'. The majority, led by the Bremen and Berlin organizations and supported theoretically by Pannekoek, felt that the KPD could be revitalized by waging a resolute struggle against the Levi leadership. The Bremen left's central role in the opposition was formalized at a second national conference on 30 November, which authorized it to create an official opposition 'information bureau'. During the months that followed, this bureau played the role of a de facto 'counter-Zentrale' for the expelled Oppositionists. (38)

Almost immediately, Pannekoek sought to put the opposition's case into sharp theoretical focus by initiating a series of polemics against Levi. In particular, he attempted to defend the left's Antiparlamentarianism by arguing that its opposition to electoral democracy was not an abstract principle, but a practical necessity rooted in the strategic requirements of the new period. The hallmark of the epoch, he wrote, was the contradiction between the objectively revolutionary nature of the post-war situation and the passivity of the masses arising from their dependence on a bourgeois mode of thought. The fundamental task of the movement was to overcome this passivity and ideological dependence by mobilizing the working class through action. To revert to parliamentary tactics in an era of class polarization would immobilize the movement and lay the foundations for its ultimate defeat. Pannekoek's opposition to parliamentary tactics was closely linked to his support for the council system, which he felt would provide the material and organizational basis for the creation of the new consciousness that would prepare the workers technically and spiritually to run society without a ruling class. (39)

The opposition's effort to counter Levi's leadership, however, had only a limited effect. The failure of the KPD to organize resistance to the abortive Kapp putsch of March 1920 provided the catalyst for the opposition to form their own organization, the Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD). The KAPD's politics were based on the premise that the organization was 'not a party in the traditional sense', but a medium to enable the working class to liberate itself from all forms of domination by leaders. The KAPD's programme was inspired largely by Pannekoek and emphasized the role of subjective factors in revolutionary development. The KAPD saw its role as one of uniting the most ideologically advanced elements of the working class and acting as leaven within the masses, spreading propaganda, organizing discussions, and when necessary, opposing the illusions of the masses. Unlike the Leninists, the KAPD stressed that the party must be a catalyst of ideas rather than a direct instrument of revolutionary action. The party's consciousness-raising activities, the KAPD felt, would create the necessary atmosphere for the self-mobilization of the working class, which would culminate in a council state. (40)

The emergence of the KAPD was paralleled by, and closely tied to, the growth of a new movement of revolutionary industrial unionism, which also owed much of its inspiration to the theoretical conceptions of Pannekoek and the Bremen left. Like the workers' councils, this movement had its origins in the factory committees that had proliferated during the last year of the war. Based almost entirely on local factory or shop organizations, the industrial union movement appeared almost spontaneously, without any precise ideological definitions or attachments, during the summer of 1919. The local unions which emerged were defined largely by their dissatisfaction with the existing trades unions, a willingness to use militant tactics, and a common anti-bureaucratic impulse (41)

In the process of ideological differentiation that followed, many of these local organizations began to look to syndicalism as a model, which led to the formation of the Free Workers' Union of Germany (FAUD) federation in late 1919. Other groups, however, turned their attention toward forming a new type of factory organization, which they termed 'workers' unions' (Arbeiter-Unionen) to distinguish them from the traditional trades unions. The theoretical cornerstone of the 'workers' union' movement was the concept of 'unitary organization', which had been intensely propagandized by the Bremen left since 1917. Although they shared many common ideological elements, the 'workers' unions' differed from the syndicalist factory organizations in their willingness to affiliate with the communist movement and their acceptance of a future state organized on the basis of the council system.

In no other city was the 'workers' union' movement as strong as in Bremen. A city-wide federation of 'workers' unions' was first formed in August 1919. By October, it had 3,000 members; by January, it had reached its peak with 7,000 members. Its main stronghold was in the docks and shipyards, where over 70 per cent of the workers were affiliated. At the Weser shipyards - a long-time bastion of the Bremen left - 3,000 workers were members.(42)

In consolidating the localized 'workers' union' movement into a national federation, the Bremen left communists played an organizationally and ideologically decisive role. The first step toward the formation of a national federation was taken in August 1919, when the Bremen federation drafted a set of provisional statutes defining the proposed federation as an 'economic organization of struggle', in solidarity with the Third International, and directed toward the establishment of a council republic. The basic unit of the federation was to be the local factory or workshop organization, each of which would be tied to a network of local, regional and national bodies, which would eventually merge into one big union. Although the proposed federation was conceived as a class-wide instrument of

struggle, each affiliated unit was to have maximum independence and freedom of choice in determining tactics.(43)

To build the new national federation, two national conferences of shop stewards from various independent revolutionary factory organizations were held in Bremen during the autumn of 1919, which authorized the Bremen group to play a co-ordinating role and to publish a national newspaper. (44) The foundation congress for the new federation finally took place in Hanover between 14-16 February 1920, when the General Workers' Union of Germany (AAUD) was formally proclaimed.

With the formation of the KAPD and the AAUD, the basic contours of the radical councilist alternative were firmly established. The new conceptions of working-class organization and activity that found expression in the KAPD and AAUD were, in part, the product of particular circumstances, but they also showed a high degree of continuity with the concepts that Pannekoek and the Bremen left radicals had developed both before and during the war. Their far reaching critiques of party and trades union-centred socialism grew out of a long-time conviction that bourgeois ideological hegemony could be transcended only by a direct confrontation with the state and capital by a militant and class-conscious working class, organized from below on the basis of new structures of proletarian power.

The initial circumstances for both the KAPD and the AAUD appeared to be highly favourable. Membership of the KAPD at the party's foundation stood at an estimated 38,000, which was several thousand more than that of the KPD and nearly double that of the Bolshevik Party at the beginning of 1917. (45) The AAUD had a membership of 80,000 within a month of its foundation, and by the spring of 1921 the number was perhaps as high as 200,000. (46) During the early months of their existence, the KAPD and the AAUD remained firmly convinced that they would win the support of Lenin and the Third International. In the hope of influencing Comintern tactics, Pannekoek drafted a lengthy brochure to the International entitled *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*, which immediately became the fundamental text of left communism. These hopes, however, were quickly dashed with the publication of Lenin's *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, which contained both an abusive polemic against Pannekoek and a general condemnation of left communism. But Lenin's condemnation was less fatal for the movement than the changed political and economic situation prevailing in Germany after 1920 and the subsequent decline in militancy and withdrawal from political activity of much of the working class. With no prospect of achieving its goals, the movement swiftly lost its mass character and underwent a rapid process of sectarian fragmentation and marginalization. The entire movement could count on no more than 20,000 supporters in 1923, and only a few hundred by the

time Hitler seized power in 1933.(47)

The process which culminated in the formation of the KAPD and the AAUD clearly testifies to the depth of an alternative tradition within German Marxism which had little in common with the Leninist communism that later became dominant. But this process also testifies to the shortcomings, imbalances, and contradictions of that tradition. These weaknesses derived first of all from the amorphous organizational structure of the movement. Both the KAPD and the AAUD were never more than a loose federation of different ideological and regional tendencies which were capable of sudden disintegration. Their reliance on spontaneous mass action and rejection of limited demands for material improvements led them consistently to refuse to create stable, permanent organizations, for fear of deadening the revolutionary dynamic with bureaucracy. Once the militancy and dynamism of the movement were checked, the organizational deficiencies became apparent and empty rhetoric and sectarian logic swiftly took hold. These organizational problems were compounded by a number of major theoretical weaknesses. In formulating their strategies, Pannekoek and the radical councilists consistently refrained from analysing empirically and in-depth key questions such as what was the exact composition of the council movement and why did the traditional trades unions and parties regain their hold on the working class so swiftly? On the contrary, their statements were written at a high level of generality and driven toward predetermined revolutionary goals. Typically, broad schematic patterns on the decline of capitalism and the rise of socialism clouded the more immediate strategic realities they sought to elucidate. But for all their shortcomings, Pannekoek and the radical councilists had the merit of attempting to give specific content to Marx's dictum that the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the workers themselves. If nothing else, their work stands as a powerful monument to the difficulties inherent in that task.

(From *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 23, No. 2, )

## Notes

This article is dedicated to the memory of my late dissertation adviser, Harvey Goldberg (1922-1987).

1. Most work on Pannekoek to date has consisted largely of anthologies of his writings. The most important of these is Serge Bricianer's pioneering work, *Pannekoek and the Workers' Councils* (St. Louis 1978). Others include: D.A Smart (ed.), *Pannekoek and Gorier's Marxism* (London 1978); Cajo Brendel, *Anton Pannekoek, Theoretikus van het Socialisme* (Nijmegen 1970); Hans-Manfred Bock, *Anton Pannekoek und Herman Gorter: Organisatie und Taktik der Proletarischen Revolutie* (Frankfurt

- 1969). Pannekoek's own autobiography has appeared as *Herinneringen* (Amsterdam 1982). These works are supplemented by a number of short articles: Paul Mattick, 'Anton Pannekoek und die Weltrevolution', *Jahrbuch Arbeiterbewegung*, no.6 (Frankfurt 1979); Hans-Manfred Bock, 'Anton Pannekoek in der Vorkriegs-Sozialdemokratie', *Jahrbuch Arbeiterbewegung*, no.3 (Frankfurt 1974); H. Schurer. 'Anton Pannekoek and the Origins of Leninism', *The Slavonic and European Review* (June 1963).
2. For the examination of the influence of Dietzgen on Pannekoek's political development, see my essay. 'The Formation of Pannekoek's Marxism' in Serge Bricianer (ed.), *Pannekoek and the Workers Councils*, op. cit.
  3. Pannekoek, 'Massenaktion und Revolution', *Die Neue Zeit* (1912). **11**, 541-50, 585-93.609-16,
  4. For a full discussion of the factional struggle in the SDAP, see Erik Hansen, 'Crisis in the Party: De Tribune Faction and the Origins of the Dutch Communist Party, 1907-9', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 11. 2-3 (April-July 1976). 43-64.
  5. Pannekoek has described his educational activities in Bremen in his *Herinneringen*, op. cit., 147-51.
  6. Hans-Manfred Bock, *Charakteristika des 'linken Radikalismus' in Deutschland: Ein Versuch* (Frankfurt 1976). 78. For an overview of the development of left radicalism in Bremen see: Karl-Ernst Moring. *Die Sozialdemokratische Partei in Bremen 1890-1914* (Hanover 1968); Josef Miller, 'Zur Geschichte der linken Sozialdemokraten in Bremen, 1906-1918', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* (1958). 202-17.
  7. Source: Gerhard Engel. 'Die politisch-ideologische Entwicklung Johann Kniefs (1880-1919)' (unpublished PhD dissertation. Humboldt University 1967), 16-20.
  8. Moring, op. cit., 74-75, 129-31.
  9. *Bremer Bürgerzeitung* (16 August 1906).
  10. Engel, op. cit., 88.
  11. Pannekoek, 'Die Massenstreikdebatte', *Bremer Bürgerzeitung* (9, 12, 13 April; 2, 3 May; **18 June 1910**); 'Die Organisation im Kampf', *Bremer Bürgerzeitung* (9 April 1910).
  12. Pannekoek, 'Sozialdemokratische Unteroffiziere', *Bremer Bürgerzeitung* (27 November 1909).
  13. For a detailed account of this strike see Helmut Kral, *Streik auf den Helgen. Die gewerkschaftliche Kampfe der deutschen Werftarbeiter vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Berlin 1964), 132-93.
  14. [ibid., 185.
- 188 Journal of Contemporary History**
15. Pannekoek, 'Gewerkschaftliche Demokratie', *Bremer Bürgerzeitung* (17 December 1910).
  16. Pannekoek, 'Das Vertretungssystem in der Arbeiterbewegung', *Bremer Bürgerzeitung* (22 April 1911).
  17. A comprehensive account of this strike is contained in Kral, op. cit., 211-69.
  18. Ibid., 235.
  19. Ibid., 225.
  20. Pannekoek, 'Werftarbeiterstreik'. *Bremer Bürgerzeitung* (9 August 1913); 'Gewerkschaftsdiziplin' (18 October 1913).
  21. Pannekoek, 'The Downfall or the International', *The New Review* (November

1914).

22. Pannekoek to Henke, 19 October 1914, Henke Archives, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (Bad Godesburg), folder 50.

23. For a detailed treatment of the Bremen left during the war see: Erhard Lucas, *Die Sozialdemokratie in Bremen während des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Bremen 1969); Engel, op. cit., 135-384.

24. Engel, op. cit., 228-30.

25. For information on Pannekoek's role in the formation of *Arbeiterpolitik*, see his correspondence with Adolf Dannat in the Staatsarchiv Bremen.

26. See in particular the following unsigned articles in *Arbeiterpolitik*: 'Einheit oder Spaltung der Partei' (15, 19 July; 5, 12, 26 August 1916); 'Die alte und die neue Bewegung' (26 August 1916).

27. [Unsigned] 'Das Kompromis von Gotha', *Arbeiterpolitik* (14 April 1917).

28. Fritz Wolffheim [pseudonym W. Meppen]. 'Gewerkschaftsprobleme', *Arbeiterpolitik* (24 March 1917).

29. Engel, op. cit., 360-66.

30. At the workers' council for the Weser shipyards, the city's largest employer, the IKD held 28 seats to 8 for the USPD and 13 for the SPD. Miller, op. cit.

31. See in particular the following *Arbeiterpolitik* articles by Pannekoek: 'Neue Aufgaben' (23 November 1918); 'Der Anfang' (23, 30 November 1918); 'Der Sozialismus der sozialistischen Regierung' (14 December 1918).

32. For an account of this congress see Erwin Alderman, *The Spartacist Uprising of 1919* (Milwaukee 1958), 149-58.

33. The most comprehensive examination of the revolution in Bremen is contained in Peter Kuckuk's two unpublished dissertations: 'Die Revolution 1918/19 in Bremen bis zur Niederschlagung der Räterepublik' (MA thesis, University of Hamburg 1964); 'Bremer Linksradi-kalen bzw. Kommunisten von der Militärrevolte in November 1918 bis zum Kapp-Putsch in März 1920' (PhD thesis, University of Hamburg 1970). Also useful is the collection of documents edited by Kuckuk, *Revolution und Räterepublik in*

*Bremen* (Frankfurt 1969).

34. Kuckuk. 'Bremer Linksradi-kalen', 185.

35. This programme is contained in Pannekoek's article, 'De strijd over de Kommunistische taktiek in Duitsland', *De Nieuwe Tijd* (1919), 693-99.

36. The most detailed account of the Heidelberg Congress and its aftermath is contained in Kuckuk, 'Bremer Linksradi-kalen', op. cit., 280-308.

37. Ruth Fischer, *Stalin and German Communism* (London 1948), 119.

38. Kuckuk, 'Bremer Linksradi-kalen'. op. cit., 386-88.

39. Anton Pannekoek [pseudonym Karl Horner], 'Taktische und organisatorische Streitfragen', *Der Kommunist* (13, 14, 15, 16 December 1919). Lenin responded to this with: 'Konnen wir auf den Parlamentarismus verzichten?', *Der Kommunist* (11 January 1920).

40. 'Programm der Kommunisten Arbeiter-Partei Deutschlands', *Die Aktion* (12 June 1920). For an overview of the KAPD's origins and development see: Hans-Manfred Bock, *Syndikalismus und Linkskommunismus von 1918-1923* (Meisenheim am

Glan 1969); Denis Authier and Jean Barrot, *La Gauche communiste en Allemagne*

(1918-1921) (Paris 1976); Fritz Kool (ed.), *Die Linke gegen die Parteiherrschaft* (Olten 1970).

41. The best accounts of the development of the revolutionary industrial union movement are: Bock, *Syndikalismus und Linkskommunismus*, op. cit.; Authier and Barrot, op. cit.; Hans Botcher, *Zur revolutionären Gewerkschaftsbewegung in Afnerika.*

*Deutschland und England* (Jena 1922); Larry Peterson, 'The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism, 1900-1925', in James Cronin and Carmen Sirianni (eds), *Work, Community, and Power: The Experience of Labor in Europe and America, 1900-1925* (Philadelphia 1983).

42. Kuckuk, 'Bremer Linksradiakalen', op. cit., 322.

43. These statutes are reprinted in Bock, *Syndikalismus und Linkskommunismus*, op. cit., 353-55.

44. An examination of the key role of the Bremen left in the formation of the AAUD is contained in Kuckuk, 'Bremer Linksradiakalen', op. cit., 310-52

45. Bock, *Syndikalismus und Linkskommunismus*, op. cit., 228.

46. Botcher, op. cit., 73.

47. Authier and Barrot, op. cit., 222.