

# The Party, The Everyday<sup>1</sup>

by André Frankin

*"Everyday life... (is)... what remains when all specialized activities have been extracted from lived experience."*

- H. Lefebvre

The crisis of left-wing political parties in Europe remains closely linked to everyday life. However, it should not be assumed that sociologists alone bear the responsibility for the now glaring fact that this everyday life, considered, in short, as the colonized domain of existence, as the "reserve" for the noble savages who keep society running, has become the very enemy of all militant activity. Certainly, sociologists have only aggravated the confusion, but party men and activists have not dared to look at this problem with the boldness that currently characterizes the ruthless system in which, for example, "mass culture" is trapped, that is to say, the freedom granted to modern capitalism to transform to its advantage the failures of daily life; these thousand and one small miseries which, added to the great one, mean that left-wing parties no longer exert the attraction or influence that they still had before the Second World War.

Why does private life stand in the way of militant activity? The answer, too readily given, is that private life is seen as truly devoid of life. This is true of those who hope—or who have hoped (and I am one of them)—that activism would compensate for the annihilation wrought by the family, social, or simply working-class environment. But when, in turn, we examine activism, when we reduce it to what it should be, we realize that it too presents an alienation perhaps far more serious than that of private life: the alienation that doesn't recognize itself as alienation. What I mean is that, all wonderful questions aside, militant life requires its insertion into daily life and that what separates it from this can take the accusatory disguise of private life or (at the other extreme) of the myth of democracy... In other words, the life of a left-wing political party is not about finding the best balance between the private lives of its members and their purely militant activity, but about ensuring that the party, the activity it demands from us, is the very requirement of daily life. The party, the everyday: there is no possible balance between these two terms, there is only dialectics [...]

Let's stop talking about a crisis of democracy or the "malfunctioning" of the left-wing political party apparatus. The problem is structural; it's not about more or less remote-controlled behaviour. The problem lies in what everyday life has, or could have, in common with party structures. However, these structures—whether in the Communist Party or other left-wing parties—remain unaffected or unchallenged when we simply accuse the party of a lack of democracy. We need to think further before we get to the heart of the problem.

First, it should be clearly established that every left-wing political organization, every structure appropriate to the party, begins and ends with a form of organization akin to that imposed on a business enterprise by its bosses. Workers' praxis is in no way autonomous, and, failing to elucidate this relationship, left-wing political parties today find themselves not even "cut off from the masses," as superficial observers would have it, but "deprived of the masses," incapable of reaching them and politicizing them, of throwing them into the heart of the action—into that action which their adversaries have already decided for them at every level, simply because they hold the only valid decision-making power in society: that of the boards of directors. Our fate is decided by the company; we ignore it because we believe that, down there, the workers have the opportunity to be something other than workers, to be something other than everyday people.

Specialists in political action are questioning whether revolutionary action has failed in the West (by West, they mean the highly industrialized countries of all continents, including Japan). As surprising as it may seem, this question is meaningless. It only retains a semblance of meaning in the mouths of faithful, obscure, and obscurely embarrassed "militants" who pose it with that vaguely humbled pride of the "believer." Even more meaningless are the answers given to the question. Most refer to "the historical mission of the proletariat," a mission which it supposedly did not undertake or which, objectively, the conditions required for this action were never met—which is by far the most foolish of answers when one is willing to admit that History in this light would never have any meaning; was made up only of "scientific" determinations, that is to say, inaccessible to those who claim to make it! Others, less pessimistic on the surface but fundamentally despairing, console themselves with the masochistic idea

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<sup>1</sup> [Trans] See 'Le Parti, le Quotidien' in *Arguments* No. 25-26 (1962)

that revolution is the privilege of underdeveloped countries. These responses are all refusals to offer a real explanation for the phenomenon of the left in the West. Isn't it, in fact, easier to dismiss the actions of the proletariat than those of the bosses?

However, this Western business class, this social capitalism (or lack thereof), this neo-colonialism even operating in certain regions of the Western world itself (the Italian Mezzogiorno, Wallonia, etc.), exerts its dialectical authority over people and things, whether we like it or not. In the 19th Century, it attempted and partially succeeded in overcoming the fundamental contradiction of its class exploitation (among other things, through the creation of those colonial empires that are now collapsing). But, as Sartre demonstrated, in the 20th Century it attempts and partially succeeds in ensuring that this contradiction is not abolished by socialism and, on the contrary, that it continues to bear its scars for a long time to come. The bosses' tactic is to render the historical process unintelligible by decisively interpreting fragmentary analyses which, on occasion, may coincide with the proletariat's positions. Turning militant action into a specialized activity is one of their favourite manoeuvres. This is why it is dangerous to attribute, outright, autonomy of action—let alone "class consciousness"—to the working class. Their opinions, or the opinion they hold collectively (not in the sense that Marx demystified the opinion of an isolated proletarian), remain, in a way, ineffective, a property injected by the bosses for purposes that only they can grasp.

The belief in an inviolable praxis of the working class inevitably reverts to anti-praxis. Here we think of Chateaubriand's saying: "Ambition without talent is a crime." A fine indictment of the actions of left-wing political parties. And indeed, the [skeletal terror] of these parties, whose only hope lies in the endlessly renewed act of faith of their "activists," contrasts sharply with the pre-war workers' organizations. Are we no longer aware that the organization of work (and, consequently, its permeation into the daily life of the worker) depends entirely on the arbitrary will of the bosses? Have we not recently seen, in Belgium and France, union representatives signing the infamous Boel, Bonpertuis (Isère), and Berliet agreements? Agreements which inexorably seal the resignation of these union organizations by placing them at the exclusive service of management? Why, then, are workers led to believe that this type of organization — or disorganization — reflects (or could reflect) what is commonly referred to as intelligibility? Shouldn't one of the terms of the contradiction — and which one — be abolished beforehand?

By conceiving of unions and political parties as autonomous forces, magically separable from production, we no longer clearly distinguish between the forces of production and the relations of production (however elementary this is), nor do we understand the relationship between them and the latter! Any union, any left-wing political party that shies away from this non-sociological analysis defines itself, sooner or later, as a union or a left-wing political party that has already abolished within itself the contradictions that drive it into existence and towards power. It becomes the myth of Class... a propensity towards Class Mobilization... but only a propensity. To reject the current type of workers' organizations without immediately seeing, through them and by them, the indissoluble link of militant activity, a product of production—just like a Simca 1000—is to say and show that class analysis can be developed outside the capitalist system—in the absurdity of the human condition! All the unions and all the parties are there.

If militant action is the everyday itself, the modification of the relations of production, that is to say, in fact, the reversal of the workers' condition, the abolition of the everyday, the recuperation of the latter as "impossible configuration of the real" (to use the formula of D. Mascolo), then such militant action begins with the absolute critique of work itself and of working conditions. However, employers, by adapting less to technology than to its contradictions, never relinquish anything but their money, never their power. This is the vital crux of left-wing political action. On this point, the originality of the promoters of the Charter of Amiens<sup>2</sup> has not been emphasized with the necessary vigour. Only their ideology has been retained, the "aristocratic" conception of skilled labour, coinciding with the anarcho-sindicalist stage of the workers' movement. This was the least original aspect of these unionists. Their true merit—and one that remains relevant today—lies in the fact that the Charter situated (better than ever before) the worker within their work environment. Since then, nothing has been said, examined, or done that did not first originate in the head office.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [Trans] 1906 Conference of the CGT which enshrined the defence of immediate and daily demands of the workers and the struggle for a transformation of society outside of political parties and the state. See wiki.

<sup>3</sup> [AF] We are not unaware of the work of G. Friedmann and others, but insofar as the sociology of work is dissociated from political demands, the proletariat remains powerless to produce its own history.

Thus, we see that the structure of any left-wing political party is directly linked to the type of trade union organization (or rather, to the way in which the relationship is established between this organization and the party). No left-wing political party is viable if it ignores this principle, but no trade union can consider itself protected if it does not recognize the necessity of a party. The absolute synchronization of their actions requires, above all, necessary splits, which are always possible after a major protest movement. The Belgian example of the winter of 1960-61 shows how the party apparatus, even when supportive of the strike, failed to seize the incredible opportunity it had to unite, not so much the rank and file with the party and union leadership, but the organizations themselves. Because the tactical problem—the fact that the credulity of activist's places greater importance on what happens within parties or unions—was also completely misguided. The dialectic within an organization doesn't necessarily continue between the base and the summit: it's more about those external factors that, outside of parties and unions, suddenly burst into everyday life, bending it to their demands.

It is unlikely that any left-wing political party or trade union would accept these criteria. It is even less likely that there will be any genuine party or trade union in the future, but any attempt to ignore this disarray, this profound and inconceivable disinterest of the working class, would first and foremost condemn opposition to these parties and trade unions themselves. One cannot effectively oppose any apparatus, whatever it may be, by adopting the methods it criticizes. The split always obeys laws external to the party or trade union. Whether we like it or not, it represents the unshakeable objective of this "No" uttered daily by millions of workers, whose lives have been reduced precisely to this "No," which no party or union is any longer capable of taking up. We must first break free from this mythology of the cadres to finally recognize the true face of the workers' struggle: the one spoken of by the carpenter somewhere in Shakespeare...<sup>4</sup>

Translated by Howard Slater  
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<sup>4</sup> [Trans] A reference to Quince in *Midsummer Night's Dream*.