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Theses of the Abstentionist Communist Faction of the Italian Socialist Party

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Though this is presented as a collective work, Bordiga was apparently the principal author: it is included in *The Science and Passion of Communism: Selected Writings of Amadeo Bordiga* and sinistra.net lists it in an index of Bordiga's works. The translation below appeared in English in Communist Program, No. 5, June 1979. The theses were originally presented at the national conference of the Communist Abstentionist Faction of the Italian Socialist Party in Florence in May 1920. This group became the core of the new Communist Party of Italy in 1921. For more background, see <https://www.sinistra.net/lib/upt/com-pro/lipu/lipuhcabie.html>. From <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1920/abstentionists.htm>.

I

1. Communism is the doctrine of the social and historical preconditions for the emancipation of the proletariat.

The elaboration of this doctrine began in the period of the first proletarian movements against the effects of the bourgeois system of production. It took shape in the Marxist critique of the capitalist economy, the method of historical materialism, the theory of class struggle and the conception of the development which will take place in the historical process of the fall of the capitalist regime and the proletarian revolution.

2. It is on the basis of this doctrine – which found its first and fundamental systematic expression in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 – that the Communist Party is constituted.

3. In the present historical period, the situation created by bourgeois relations of production, based on the private ownership of the means of production and exchange, on the private appropriation of the products of collective labour and on free competition in private trade of all products, becomes more and more intolerable for the proletariat.

4. To these economic relations correspond the political institutions characteristic of capitalism: the state based on democratic and parliamentary representation. In a society divided into classes, the state is the organisation of the power of the class which is economically privileged. Although the bourgeoisie represents a minority within society, the democratic state represents the system of armed force organised for the purpose of preserving the capitalist relations of production.

5. The struggle of the proletariat against capitalist exploitation assumes a succession of forms going from the violent destruction of machines to the organisation on

a craft basis to improve working conditions, to the creation of factory councils, and to attempts to take possession of enterprises.

In all these individual actions, the proletariat moves in the direction of the decisive revolutionary struggle against the power of the bourgeois state, which prevents the present relations of production from being broken.

6. This revolutionary struggle is the conflict between the whole proletarian class and the whole bourgeois class. Its instrument is the political class party, the communist party, which achieves the conscious organisation of the proletarian vanguard aware of the necessity of unifying its action, **in space** – by transcending the interests of particular groups, trades or nationalities – and **in time** – by subordinating to the final outcome of the struggle the partial gains and conquests which do not modify the essence of the bourgeois structure.

Consequently it is only by organising itself into a political party that the proletariat constitutes itself into a class struggling for its emancipation.

7. The objective of the action of the Communist Party is the violent overthrow of bourgeois rule, the conquest of political power by the proletariat, and the organisation of the latter into a ruling class.

8. Parliamentary democracy in which citizens of every class are represented is the form assumed by the organisation of the bourgeoisie into a ruling class. The organisation of the proletariat into a ruling class will instead be achieved through the dictatorship of the proletariat, that is, through a type of state in which representation (the system of workers' councils) will be decided only by members of the working class (the industrial proletariat and the poor peasants), with the bourgeois being denied the right to vote.

9. After the old bureaucratic, police and military machine has been destroyed, the proletarian state will unify the armed forces of the labouring class into an organisation which will have as its task the repression of all counter-revolutionary attempts by the dispossessed class and the execution of measures of intervention into bourgeois relations of production and property.

10. The process of transition from the capitalist economy to a communist one will be extremely complex and its phases will differ according to differing degrees of economic development. The endpoint of this process will be the total achievement of the ownership and management of the means of production by the whole unified collectivity, together with the central and rational distribution of productive forces among the different branches of production, and finally the central administration of the allocation of products by the collectivity.

11. When capitalist economic relationships have been entirely eliminated, the abolition of classes will be an accomplished fact and the state, as a political apparatus of power, will be progressively replaced by the rational, collective administration of economic and social activity.

12. The process of transforming the relations of production will be accompanied by a wide range of social measures stemming from the principle that the collectivity takes charge of the physical and intellectual existence of all its members. In this way, all the birth marks which the proletariat has inherited from the capitalist world will be progressively eliminated and, in the words of the *Manifesto*, in place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.

13. The pre-conditions for the victory of proletarian power in the struggle for the realization of communism are to be found not so much in the rational use of skills in technical tasks, as in the fact that political responsibilities and the control of the state apparatus are confided to those people who will put the general interest and the final triumph of communism before the particular and limited interests of groups.

Precisely because the Communist Party is the organisation of proletarians who have achieved this class consciousness, the aim of the party will be, by its propaganda, to win elective posts for its members within the social organisation. The dictatorship of the proletariat will therefore be the dictatorship of the Communist Party and the latter will be a party of government in a sense totally opposed to that of the old oligarchies, for communists will assume responsibilities which will demand the maximum of sacrifice and renunciation and they will take upon their shoulders the heaviest burden of the revolutionary task which falls on the proletariat in the difficult labour through which a new world will come to birth.

II

1. The critique which communists continuously make on the basis of the fundamental methods of Marxism, and the propagation of the conclusions to which it leads, have as their objective the extirpation of those influences which the ideological systems of other classes and other parties have over the proletariat.

2. First of all, communism sweeps away idealist conceptions which consider the material of the world of thought as the base, and not the result, of the real relations of human life and of their development. All religious and philosophical formulations of this type must be considered as the ideological baggage of classes whose supremacy – which preceded the bourgeois epoch – rested on an ecclesiastical, aristocratic or dynastic organisation receiving its authority only from a pretended super-human investiture.

One symptom of the decadence of the modern bourgeoisie is the fact that those old ideologies which it had itself destroyed reappear in its midst under new forms.

A communism founded on idealist bases would be an unacceptable absurdity.

3. In still more characteristic fashion, communism is the demolition of the conceptions of liberalism and bourgeois democracy by the Marxist critique. The juridical assertion of freedom of thought and political equality of citizens, and the idea that institutions founded on the rights of the majority and on the mechanism of universal electoral representation are a sufficient base for a gradual and indefinite progress of human society, are ideologies which correspond to the regime of private economy and free competition, and to the interests of the capitalist class.

4. One of the illusions of bourgeois democracy is the belief that the living conditions of the masses can be improved through increasing the education and training provided by the ruling classes and their institutions. In fact it is the opposite: raising the intellectual level of the great masses demands, as a pre-condition, a better standard of material life, something which is incompatible with the bourgeois regime. Moreover through its schools, the bourgeoisie tries to broadcast precisely the ideologies which inhibit the masses from perceiving the present institutions as the very obstacle to their emancipation.

5. Another fundamental tenet of bourgeois democracy lies in the principle of nationality. The formation of states on a national basis corresponds to the class necessities of the bourgeoisie at the moment when it establishes its own power, in that it can thus avail itself of national and patriotic ideologies (which correspond to certain

interests common in the initial period of capitalism to people of the same race, language and customs) and use them to delay and mitigate the conflict between the capitalist state and the proletarian masses.

National irredentisms are thus born of essentially bourgeois interests.

The bourgeoisie itself does not hesitate to trample on the principle of nationality as soon as the development of capitalism drives it to the often violent conquest of foreign markets and to the resulting conflict among the great states over the latter. Communism transcends the principle of nationality in that it demonstrates the identical predicament in which the mass of disinherited workers find themselves with respect to employers, whatever may be the nationality of either the former or the latter; it proclaims the international association to be the type of political organisation which the proletariat will create when it, in turn, comes to power.

In the perspective of the communist critique, therefore, the recent world war was brought about by capitalist imperialism. This critique demolishes those various interpretations which take up the viewpoint of one or another bourgeois state and try to present the war as a vindication of the national rights of certain peoples or as a struggle of democratically more advanced states against those organised on pre-bourgeois forms, or finally, as a supposed necessity of self-defence against enemy aggression.

6. Communism is likewise opposed to the conceptions of bourgeois pacifism and to Wilsonian illusions on the possibility of a world association of states, based on disarmament and arbitration and having as its pre-condition the Utopia of a sub-division of state units by nationality. For communists, war will become impossible and national questions will be solved only when the capitalist regime has been replaced by the International Communist Republic.

7. In a third area, communism presents itself as the transcendence of the systems of utopian socialism which seek to eliminate the faults of social organisation by instituting complete plans for a new organisation of society whose possibility of realisation was not put in relationship to the real development of history.

8. The proletariat's elaboration of its own interpretation of society and history to guide its action against the social relations of the capitalist world, continuously gives rise to a multitude of schools or currents, influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the very immaturity of the conditions of struggle and by all the various bourgeois prejudices. From all this arise the errors and setbacks in proletarian action. But it is due to this material of experience that the communist movement succeeds in defining with ever greater clarity the central features of its doctrine and its tactics, differentiating itself clearly from all the other currents active within the proletariat itself and openly combating them.

9. The formation of producers' co-operatives, in which the capital belongs to the workers who work in them, cannot be a path towards the suppression of the capitalist system. This is because the acquisition of raw materials and the distribution of products are effected according to the laws of private economy and consequently, credit, and therefore private capital ultimately exercises control over the collective capital of the co-operative itself.

10. Communists cannot consider economic trade or craft organisations to be sufficient for the struggle for the proletarian revolution or as the basic organs of the communist economy.

The organisation of the class through trade unions serves to neutralise competition between workers of the same trade and prevents wages falling to the lowest

level. However it cannot lead to the elimination of capitalist profit, still less to the unification of the workers of all trades against the privilege of bourgeois power. Further, the simple transfer of the ownership of the enterprises from the private employer to the workers' union could not achieve the basic economic features of communism, for the latter necessitates the transfer of ownership to the whole proletariat collectively since this is the only way to eliminate the characteristics of the private economy in the appropriation and distribution of products.

Communists consider the union as the site of an initial proletarian experience which permits the workers to go further towards the concept and the practice of political struggle, which has as its organ the class party.

11. In general, it is an error to believe that the revolution is a question of forms of organisations which proletarians group into according to their position and interests within the framework of the capitalist system of production.

It is not a modification of the structure of economic organisations, then, which can provide the proletariat with an effective instrument for its emancipation.

Factory unions and factory councils emerge as organs for the defence of the interests of the proletarians of different enterprises at the point when it begins to appear possible that capitalist despotism in the management of the enterprises could be limited. But obtaining the right of these organisations to supervise (to monitor) production to a more or less large degree is not incompatible with the capitalist system and could even be used by it as a means to preserve its domination.

Even the transfer of factory management to factory councils would not mean (any more than in the case of the unions) the advent of the communist system. According to the true communist conception, workers' supervision of production will not be achieved until after the overthrow of bourgeois power, and it will be a supervision over the running of every enterprise exercised by the whole proletariat unified in the state of workers' councils. Communist management of production will be the direction of every branch and every productive unit by rational collective organs which will represent the interests of all workers united in the work of building communism.

12. Capitalist relations of production cannot be modified by the intervention of the organs of bourgeois power.

This is why the transfer of private enterprises to the state or to the local government does not correspond in the slightest to the communist conception. Such a transfer is invariably accompanied by the payment of the capital value of the enterprise to the former owners who thus fully retain their right to exploit. The enterprises themselves continue to function as private enterprises within the framework of the capitalist economy, and they often become convenient instruments in the work of class preservation and defence undertaken by the bourgeois state.

13. The idea that capitalist exploitation of the proletariat can be gradually diminished and then eliminated by the legislative and reformist action of present political institutions, be it elicited by representatives of the proletarian party inside those institutions or even by mass agitation, leads only to complicity in the defence of the privileges of the bourgeoisie. The latter will on occasion pretend to give up a minimum of its privileges in order to try to appease the anger of the masses and to divert their revolutionary attempts against the bases of the capitalist regime.

14. The conquest of political power by the proletariat, even if such an objective is considered as the final, total aim of its action, cannot be achieved by winning a majority within bourgeois elective organs.

Thanks to the executive organs of the state, which are the direct agents of the bourgeoisie, the latter very easily ensures a majority within the elective organs for its delegates or for those elements which fall under its influence or into its game because they want to individually or collectively win elective posts. Moreover, participation in such institutions requires the agreement to respect the juridical and political bases of the bourgeois constitution. This agreement is merely formal but nevertheless it is sufficient to free the bourgeoisie from even the slightest embarrassment of an accusation of formal illegality at the point when it will logically resort to its real means of armed defence rather than abandon power and permit the proletariat to smash its bureaucratic and military machine of domination.

15. To recognise the necessity of insurrectionary struggle for the seizure of power, while at the same time proposing that the proletariat exercise its power by conceding representation to the bourgeoisie in new political organisations (constituent assemblies or combinations of these with the system of workers' councils) is an unacceptable program and is opposed to the central communist demand, the dictatorship of the proletariat. The process of expropriating the bourgeoisie would be immediately compromised if this class retained a means to influence somehow the formation of the representative organs of the expropriating proletarian state. This would permit the bourgeoisie to use the influence which it will inevitably retain because of its experience and its intellectual and technical training, in order to deploy its political activity towards the reestablishment of its power in a counter-revolution. The same consequences would result if the slightest democratic prejudice was allowed to survive in regard to an equality of treatment which is supposedly to be granted to the bourgeois by the proletarian power in such matters as freedom of association, propaganda and the press.

16. The program which proposes an organ of political representation based on delegates from the various trades and professions of all the social classes is not even in form a road leading to the system of workers' councils, since the latter is characterised by the exclusion of the bourgeois from electoral rights and its central organisation is not chosen on the basis of trade but by territorial constituency. The form of representation in question is rather an inferior stage even in comparison with present parliamentary democracy.

17. Anarchism is profoundly opposed to the ideas of communism. It aims at the immediate installation of a society without a state and political system and advocates, for the economy of the future, the autonomous functioning of units of production, rejecting any concept of a central organisation and regulation of human activities in production and distribution. Such a conception is close to that of the bourgeois private economy and remains alien to the fundamental essence of communism. Moreover the immediate elimination of the state as a machinery of political power would be equivalent to a failure to offer resistance to the counter-revolution, unless one presupposes that classes have been immediately abolished, that is to say that there has been the so-called revolutionary expropriation simultaneous with the insurrection against bourgeois power.

Not the slightest possibility of this exists, given the complexity of the proletarian tasks in the substitution of the communist economy for the present one, and given the necessity that such a process be directed by a central organisation representing the general interest of the proletariat and subordinating to this interest all the local and particular interests which act as the principal conservative force within capitalism.

III

1. The communist doctrine and economic determinism do not see communists as passive spectators of historical destiny but on the contrary as indefatigable fighters. Struggle and action, however, would be ineffective if divorced from the lessons of doctrine and of experience seen in the light of the communist critique.

2. The revolutionary work of communists is based on the organisation into a party of those proletarians who unite a consciousness of communist principles with the decision to devote all their energy to the cause of the revolution. The party, organised internationally, functions on the basis of discipline towards the decisions of the majority and towards the decisions of the central organs chosen by that majority to lead the movement.

3. Propaganda and proselytism – in which the party accepts new members only on the basis of the most sure guarantees – are fundamental activities of the party. Although it bases the success of its action on the propagation of its principles and final objectives and although it struggles in the interest of the immense majority of society, the communist movement does not make the approval of the majority a pre-condition for its action. The criterion which determines the occasion to launch a revolutionary action is the objective evaluation of our own forces and those of our enemies, taking into consideration all the complex factors of which the numerical element is not the sole or even the most important determinant.

4. The communist party, internally, develops an intense work of study and political critique intimately linked to the exigencies of action and to historical experience, and it strives to organise this work on an international basis. Externally, in all circumstances and with the means at its disposal, it works to diffuse the lessons of its own critical experience and to refute enemy schools and parties. Above all, the party conducts its activity and propaganda among the proletarian masses and works to polarise them around it, particularly at those times when they are set in motion in reaction against the conditions capitalism imposes upon them and especially within the organisations formed by proletarians to defend their immediate interests.

5. Communists therefore penetrate proletarian co-operatives, unions, factory councils, and form groups of communist workers within them. They strive to win a majority and posts of leadership so that the mass of proletarians mobilised by these associations subordinate their action to the highest political and revolutionary ends of the struggle for communism.

6. The communist party, on the other hand, remains outside all institutions and associations in which bourgeois and workers participate in common, or worse still, which are led and sponsored by members of the bourgeoisie (societies of mutual assistance, charities, cultural schools, popular universities, Freemasons' Lodges, etc.). It combats the action and influence of these institutions and associations and tries to divert proletarians from them.

7. Participation in elections to the representative organs of bourgeois democracy and participation in parliamentary activity, while always presenting a continuous danger of deviation, may be utilised for propaganda and for schooling the movement during the period in which there does not yet exist the possibility of overthrowing bourgeois rule and in which, as a consequence, the party's task is restricted to criticism and opposition. In the present period, which began with the end of the world war, with the first communist revolutions and the creation of the Third International, communists pose, as the direct objective of the political action of the proletariat in every country, the revolutionary conquest of power, to which end all the energy and

all the preparatory work of the party must be devoted.

In this period, it is inadmissible to participate in these organs which function as a powerful defensive instrument of the bourgeoisie and which are designed to operate even within the ranks of the proletariat. It is precisely in opposition to these organs, to their structure as to their function, that communists call for the system of workers' councils and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Because of the great importance which electoral activity assumes in practice, it is not possible to reconcile this activity with the assertion that it is not the means of achieving the principal objective of the party's action, which is the conquest of power. It also is not possible to prevent it from absorbing all the activity of the movement and from diverting it from revolutionary preparation.

8. The electoral conquest of local governmental bodies entails the same inconveniences as parliamentarism but to an even greater degree. It cannot be accepted as a means of action against bourgeois power for two reasons:

1. these local bodies have no real power but are subjected to the state machine, and
2. although the assertion of the principle of local autonomy can today cause some embarrassment for the ruling bourgeoisie, such a method would have the result of providing it with a base of operations in its struggle against the establishment of proletarian power and is contrary to the communist principle of centralised action.

9. In the revolutionary period, all the efforts of the communists concentrate on enabling the action of the masses to attain a maximum of intensity and efficiency. Communists combine propaganda and revolutionary preparation with the organisation of large and frequent proletarian demonstrations above all in the major centres and strive to use economic movements in order to organise demonstrations of a political character in which the proletariat reaffirms and strengthens its will to overthrow the bourgeois power.

10. The Communist Party carries its propaganda into the ranks of the bourgeois army. Communist anti-militarism is not based on a sterile humanitarianism. Its aim instead is to convince proletarians that the bourgeoisie arms them to defend its own interests and to use their force against the cause of the proletariat.

11. The Communist Party trains itself to act as the general staff of the proletariat in the revolutionary war. For this reason it prepares and organises its own network of intelligence and communication. Above all, it supports and organises the arming of the proletariat.

12. The Communist Party concludes no agreements or alliances with other political movements which share with it a specific immediate objective, but diverge from it in their program of further action. It must equally refuse the alliance – otherwise known as the united fronts – with all working class tendencies which accept insurrectionary action against the bourgeoisie but diverge from the communist program in the development of subsequent action.

Communists have no reason to consider the growth of forces tending to overthrow bourgeois power as a favourable condition when the forces working for the constitution of proletarian power on communist directives remain insufficient, since only a communist leadership can assure its success.

13. The soviets or councils of workers, peasants and soldiers, constitute the organs of proletarian power and can exercise their true function only after the overthrow of bourgeois rule.

Soviets are not in themselves organs of revolutionary struggle. They become revolutionary when the Communist Party wins a majority within them.

Workers' councils can also arise before the revolution, in a period of acute crisis in which the state power is seriously threatened.

In a revolutionary situation, it may be necessary for the party to take the initiative in forming soviets, but this cannot be a means of precipitating such a situation. If the power of the bourgeoisie is strengthened, the survival of councils can present a serious danger to the revolutionary struggle – the danger of a conciliation and a combination of proletarian organs with the organs of bourgeois democracy.

14. What distinguishes communists is not that, in every situation and in every episode of the class struggle, they call for the immediate mobilisation of all proletarian forces for a general insurrection. What distinguishes them is that they clearly say that the phase of insurrection is an inevitable outcome of the struggle, and that they prepare the proletariat to face it in conditions favourable to the success and the further development of the revolution.

Depending on the situation – which the party can better assess than the rest of the proletariat – the party can therefore find itself confronted with the necessity to act in order to hasten or to delay the moment of the decisive battle. In any event, the specific task of the party is to fight both against those who, desiring to hasten revolutionary action at any price, could drive the proletariat into disaster, and against the opportunists who exploit every occasion in which decisive action is undesirable in order to block the revolutionary movement by diverting the action of the masses towards other objectives. The Communist Party, on the contrary, must lead the action of the masses always further in an effective preparation for the final and inevitable armed struggle against the defensive forces of bourgeois rule.