

# Understanding the Dictatorship of the Proletariat The Canadian Left and the Moment of Socialist Possibility in 1919

Peter Campbell

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Article abstract

The Canadian labour revolt was about more than wages and working conditions. The year 1919 was also a moment of socialist possibility in which the Russian Revolution and the influence of Marx and Engels fuelled the revolutionary intent of a radicalizing Canadian working class. The idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat, long since lost in the shadow of Stalin's terror, fuelled this moment of socialist possibility. The longing for a workers' state was a nation-wide phenomenon, but it manifested itself more deeply and broadly in western Canada than in the east. West of the Great Lakes, the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat was hotly debated in the pages of socialist papers and in the halls of the labour movement. Knowledge of the debate concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat provides a more complete understanding of the labour revolt of 1919 and its legacy for Canadian history and the international left.

## ARTICLE

# Understanding the Dictatorship of the Proletariat: The Canadian Left and the Moment of Socialist Possibility in 1919

**Peter Campbell**

IN THE AFTERMATH OF World War I the dictatorship of the proletariat became a key principle feeding the labour revolt of 1919.<sup>1</sup> In the late winter and spring of that year the concept became influential on the Canadian left, leading to its adoption at the convention of the British Columbia Federation of Labor in Calgary, Alberta on 10–12 March 1919, and the Western Labor Conference held 13–15 March 1919. Eighty-seven delegates at the BC Fed convention, and more than 230 delegates at the Western Labor Conference, failed to register a single protest against adopting Resolution #5, which advocated accepting the principle of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Endorsing the dictatorship of the proletariat was part of radical western labour's revolt against eastern Canadian dominance of the Canadian Trades and Labor Congress (TLCC), which had come to a head at the annual convention of the TLCC in Quebec City in September 1918.<sup>2</sup>

Far from being a minor storyline in a much bigger plot, the endorsement of the dictatorship of the proletariat at the March 1919 western labour conferences advances our understanding of one of the central debates in Canadian labour history. The dictatorship of the proletariat is one of the “international conjunctures” that Gregory S. Kealey identifies as demonstrating “that 1919

1. Gregory S. Kealey, “1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984), 11–44.

2. At the convention, a caucus of western delegates decided to hold a meeting prior to the next convention of the TLCC, setting in motion the process that culminated in Calgary, Alberta in March 1919. David Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto 1978), 68–70.

was an international event ... which knew no national limits.”<sup>3</sup> Kealey is right – the dictatorship of the proletariat was debated nationally – but the historical record also reveals that it was a debate of greater significance and intensity in western Canada than in eastern Canada. David Bercuson is right – western labour was more radical. Indeed, Bercuson himself writes that the Socialist Party of Canada “called for the elimination of capitalism and its replacement by the dictatorship of the proletariat.”<sup>4</sup> What Bercuson does not acknowledge is that advocacy of the dictatorship of the proletariat went far beyond the confines of the Socialist Party of Canada, and his own observation confirms Kealey’s argument that the labour revolt of 1919 was inspired by revolutionary ideas emanating from Russia, Western Europe, and the United States.<sup>5</sup> If we are to fully appreciate the moment of 1919, we must see more than wages and working conditions, and we must surmount what Bryan Palmer calls Bercuson’s “impatience with doctrinal questions and theoretical debates on the left.”<sup>6</sup>

The labour revolt of 1919 was a moment of putting ideas into action, as well as a moment of demands for better wages and working conditions. The dictatorship of the proletariat was one of those ideas, and we must return to the meanings the principle had at the moment of 1919. As Hal Draper points out, with the rise of Stalin in the mid-1920s the term became “a code word for a species of totalitarian dictatorship, and hence devoid of any independent theoretical interest.”<sup>7</sup> By then, the dictatorship of the proletariat had become a mockery of Marx’s original conception of it and a major source of division, not unity, on the Canadian left. To make the dictatorship of the proletariat once again a principle of “independent theoretical interest” is to return to a time

3. Kealey, “1919,” 34.

4. Bercuson argues that western workers were more “radical,” in the sense that they sought more extreme change, than eastern Canadian workers. They were not necessarily more “militant,” in the sense of being combative, than eastern workers. David Jay Bercuson, “Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier: 1897–1919,” in J.L. Granatstein, Irving M. Abella, David J. Bercuson, R. Craig Brown, and H. Blair Neatby, eds., *Twentieth Century Canada: A Reader* (Toronto 1986), 137.

5. The Socialist Party of Canada (SPC), organized in late 1904/early 1905, was a revolutionary Marxist party based in Vancouver, British Columbia. In theory an “impossibilist” party that rejected the advocacy of reforms because they caused workers to question the need to overthrow the capitalist system, in practice the members it elected to the British Columbia legislature prior to World War I supported a number of reforms of benefit to the working class. Never large, membership likely peaked at 5,000–5,500 in 1910–11, when the party’s ranks were depleted by defections to the Social Democratic Party. Membership fell into the 2,500–3,000 range by the end of the war. Leading members, notably Bill Pritchard and Jack Kavanagh, were instrumental in increasingly identifying the SPC with industrial unionism and solidifying the Party’s influence at the western labour conferences.

6. Bryan D. Palmer, “Working-Class Canada: Recent Historical Writing,” *Queen’s Quarterly*, 86 (Winter 1979/80), 595.

7. Hal Draper, *The “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” From Marx to Lenin* (New York 1987), 142.

when it represented, not the death knell of socialist possibility, but socialist possibility itself.

At first glance, the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat seems an unlikely candidate to demonstrate the revolutionary intent of the Canadian left. In his exhaustive and ground-breaking work, Hal Draper discovers that Marx and Engels used the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” on only twelve occasions in more than 40 volumes of work. It appears in three periods – 1850–52, 1871–75, and again in 1890–93, when it was used by Engels following Marx’s death.<sup>8</sup> Draper insists on our complete understanding of one fundamental point, that for Marx the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” meant nothing more, and nothing less, than a workers’ state, variously described by Marx as the “rule,” the “political ascendancy” or the “sway” of the proletariat.<sup>9</sup> Draper also insists that we understand that the workers’ state envisioned by Marx is a democratic republic, in contrast to how, under Stalin, the concept of a workers’ state as the dictatorship of the proletariat would be emptied of all democratic and revolutionary content.<sup>10</sup>

Use of the actual phrase “dictatorship of the proletariat” was unusual prior to 1919, but Canadian socialists had nonetheless been debating the concept for more than a decade by that time. It was in evidence at least as early as 1907, by which time the Socialist Party of Canada was making Marx’s account of the Paris Commune, *The Civil War in France*, available to the reading public.<sup>11</sup> In his introduction to the German edition of 1891 of *The Civil War in France*, Engels famously wrote:

Of late, the Social-Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.<sup>12</sup>

On Sunday, 17 March 1907, the Socialist Party of Canada held a meeting in Vancouver’s Grand Theatre to pay homage to the Communards of Paris, a meeting that may have been inspired by the influence of *The Civil War in France*. The account in the *Western Clarion* noted that the Communards were

8. Hal Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution: Volume III, The ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’* (New York 1986); Draper, *The ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’ From Marx to Lenin*. Richard Hunt takes up Draper’s “brilliant core insight” in *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels, Volume I, Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy, 1818–1850* (Pittsburgh 1974), 284–336, quotation at 285.

9. Draper, *Volume III, The ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat,’* 1.

10. Draper, *The ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’ From Marx to Lenin*, 8.

11. *Western Clarion*, 13 April 1907. My thanks to David Frank for pointing out a rather egregious error I made concerning the availability of *The Civil War in France* in an early draft of this paper.

12. Karl Marx and V.I. Lenin, *The Civil War in France: The Paris Commune* (New York 1968), 22.

butchered “for attempting the inauguration of a Socialist administration of common affairs, and the abolition of capitalist class rule.”<sup>13</sup> In this reporting we see the dialectical relationship between what Mehmet Tabak calls the “positive function” and “coercive function” of the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>14</sup> The goal of the Communards was described as “a Socialist administration of common affairs,” a characterization that understood the Commune as the dictatorship of the proletariat as Marx and Engels envisioned it.

The other element of the dialectic is “the abolition of capitalist class rule,” which invokes what Hal Draper calls “the suppressive tasks of a workers’ government.”<sup>15</sup> This “negative function,” in Tabak’s terminology, emerged in E.T. Kingsley’s speech at the Grand Theatre, when he observed that the Communards “should never have allowed these bourgeois traitors to get out of Paris, unless they went out in such shape as would ensure their never coming back.”<sup>16</sup> According to Kingsley, the Communards made the mistake of relying on “the honesty of their intentions and the purity of their administration.” Kingsley summed up the lesson of the Paris Commune by saying that the working class “may again be confronted with a similar situation; let them profit by this lesson.”<sup>17</sup> Three years later, on the anniversary of the Paris Commune, a *Western Clarion* editorial echoed Kingsley’s exhortation:

Hereafter, when the hour for revolt rings out, let the proletariat remember the Commune and strike hard and strike home without mercy. Not for revenge, but for future self-protection and the protection of their women and babes.<sup>18</sup>

In his analysis of Marx’s *The Civil War in France*, Hal Draper characterizes the revolutionary assessment of the Parisian events of 1871 as a “celebration

13. “Vive la Commune!” *Western Clarion*, 23 March 1907.

14. Mehmet Tabak, “Marx’s Theory of Proletarian Dictatorship Revisited,” *Science & Society*, 64 (Fall 2000), 333.

15. Draper, *The ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’ From Marx to Lenin*, 82.

16. Napoleon III initiated a war with Prussia in July 1870 that turned out disastrously. By September 1870 Paris was under siege, and the city surrendered to the Prussians on 28 January 1871. The citizen militias formed during the siege of Paris, collectively known as the National Guard, were allowed to keep their weapons. In February 1871, with the imperial government at Versailles, liberal Republican Adolphe Thiers became head of the provisional government in Paris. Thiers grew alarmed at the increasing radicalization of the citizen militias and the fact that they were amassing cannons and other arms. On 18 March 1871 Thiers ordered the regular troops to seize all citizen arms. When many of the regular troops went over to the National Guard, Thiers, along with regular soldiers, police, administrators and professionals fled to Versailles. Kingsley argued that the Communards should not have allowed Thiers and the other anti-Communards to flee the city peacefully.

17. “Vive la Commune!” *Western Clarion*, 23 March 1907. For Kingsley’s importance to the Socialist Party of Canada see Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899–1919* (Toronto 1977), 15, 60–61.

18. “The Eighteenth of March,” *Western Clarion*, 19 March 1910.

of the extraordinary advance in *democracy* represented by the Commune government form and actions.”<sup>19</sup> Draper has nothing to say about the fact that Marx, in Paul Dorn’s words, also excoriated the Commune for “its lack of relentless and decisive action against the bourgeoisie.”<sup>20</sup> In short, Draper is mistaken at those points in his analysis in which he claims that Marx’s definition of the dictatorship of the proletariat did not encompass “the suppressive tasks of a workers’ government.” More than ten years before the March 1919 labour conferences, Canadian socialists and trade unionists had been exposed to an understanding of the dictatorship of the proletariat that accepted the necessity of repressive, if defensive, action by a victorious working class.

A second crucial influence on the Canadian left’s understanding of the dictatorship of the proletariat was Lenin’s classic *The State and Revolution*, published in 1918. Norman Penner asserts that the dictatorship of the proletariat “seems to have been the first new theoretical postulate coming out of the Russian Revolution to attract the attention of Canadian socialists.”<sup>21</sup> It was, of course, a postulate whose writing preceded by a few months the October Revolution, but Penner is correct about the attention it drew from Canadian socialists. The Socialist Party’s interpretation of Marx’s *The Civil War in France* reveals that the meaning the term embodied was well understood. With the arrival in Canada of *The State and Revolution* in the spring of 1919, however, a subtle but immensely important new interpretation of the concept made its presence felt on the Canadian left.<sup>22</sup>

A closer look at *The State and Revolution* reveals why Lenin’s ideas gained acceptance among Canadian radicals. Writing before the October Revolution, and the accompanying counter-revolution, Lenin evinced an idealism that resonated with an eager audience in 1919. The Bolshevik leader argued that the suppression of the minority of exploiters by the majority of “wage slaves” would be “comparatively so easy, simple and natural.” At one point Lenin suggested that the proletariat would triumph, not through the aegis of a vanguard party, but by sheer force of numbers.<sup>23</sup> Lenin’s use of the term “wage slaves,” which was ubiquitous in the Canadian socialist movement in the era of the labour revolt, and his claim that the revolutionary transformation would be carried out by a working-class majority, were taken as givens by the great majority of Canadian socialists. Any concerns about the “crushing of oppressors” or the

19. Draper skews Marx’s meaning by claiming that there is nothing “specially ‘dictatorial’” about his understanding of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Here Draper is overreacting to Marx’s critics, rather than focusing on correctly interpreting Marx himself. Draper, *The ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’ From Marx to Lenin*, 30.

20. Paul Dorn, “Two Months of Red Splendor: The Paris Commune and Marx’ Theory of Revolution,” <http://www.runmuki.com/paul/writing/marx.html>.

21. Norman Penner, *The Canadian Left: A Critical Analysis* (Toronto 1977), 64–5.

22. Tim Buck, *Lenin and Canada* (Toronto 1970), 19.

23. V.I. Lenin, *State and Revolution* (New York 1969), 74–75.

“necessary suppression of the minority” were likely allayed by Lenin defining the dictatorship of the proletariat as “the period of transition to Communism” that would “produce democracy for the people.”<sup>24</sup> By 1917, then, Lenin was placing greater emphasis on the “suppressive tasks” function of the dictatorship of the proletariat, but he had not abandoned Marx’s original and essential meaning.

It is now possible, indeed necessary, to revisit the debate about Canadian labour and socialist radicalism in eastern and western Canada. Was the moment of 1919 a national manifestation of an international trend, or was it in fact a Western-based protest against an eastern-based international trade union movement controlled by conservative elements in the American Federation of Labor-affiliated Canadian Trades and Labor Congress? The “western exceptionalist” position, most fully evoked by Bercuson, is buttressed by the split that occurred at the September 1918 Quebec City convention of the TLCC. At the congress western resolutions favouring industrial unionism and other radical positions were repeatedly voted down although, as Kealey points out, they received significant, albeit minority, support from eastern Canadian delegates.<sup>25</sup> The die was now cast and the process that would lead to the March 1919 western labour conventions was set in motion.

Focusing on the dictatorship of the proletariat provides new ways of looking at the western exceptionalist debate, and lends credence to both sides of the argument. We need to begin in the summer of 1917, when *The Canadian Forward*, the paper of the Social Democratic Party of Canada (SDPC), published Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. The Ontario-based SDPC, with a membership of roughly 5,500 in 1914, consisted of a loose federation of locals featuring strong Finnish, Ukrainian, and Russian foreign language branches.<sup>26</sup> The Toronto-based *Canadian Forward*, edited by British immigrant Isaac Bainbridge, had at one time a readership of some 35,000 persons, although state repression during World War I had likely reduced that readership to between 15,000 and 20,000.<sup>27</sup> The publication of the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* in the summer of 1917 reveals that Bainbridge was bravely attempting to resist state repression; he had been arrested and charged with seditious libel in April 1917, and would again face legal action on the same charge in September 1917.<sup>28</sup>

24. Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 73–74.

25. Kealey, “1919,” 36.

26. For party membership and the importance of the foreign language federations see Ian Milligan, “Sedition in Wartime Ontario: The Trials and Imprisonment of Isaac Bainbridge, 1917–1918,” *Ontario History*, 100 (Autumn 2008), 161.

27. Ian McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People’s Enlightenment in Canada, 1890–1920* (Toronto 2008), 178.

28. Milligan, “Sedition in Wartime Ontario,” 163–73; McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise*, 449–50.



The *Critique of the Gotha Programme* was published in installments, the first on 25 June, the second on 10 July. The translation published by the *Canadian Forward* was taken from the 7 January 1900 issue of *The People*, the official organ of the Socialist Labor Party of America; it included Engels' preface of 6 January 1891, and Marx's letter to Wilhelm Bracke of 5 May 1875. For our purposes the salient aspect of the publication of the *Critique* is the fact that the third installment of the *Critique* was never published, in spite of being announced at the end of the second installment on 10 July. The *Critique* is in four sections, and the fourth section was not published. The crucial point relating to our subject is that Marx's definition of the workers' state as the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat is in section four, the one not published. While it will likely never be known if this is the reason why the last installment was not published, there is corroborating evidence to suggest that it may have been.

By the summer and early fall of 1918, the *Canadian Forward* was publishing material about and by Lenin and the Bolsheviks. The last two issues of the *Canadian Forward* published on 10 and 24 September 1918 both contained articles dealing with the dictatorship of the proletariat. These articles revealed that the paper and its editor, both facing ongoing state repression, were torn between giving the Bolsheviks a fair hearing and not wanting to antagonize Canadian authorities. The entire front page of the 10 September 1918 issue was taken up with Lenin's "The Main Problem of Our Days," translated from *Pravda* of April 1918. In the article Lenin wrote:

We introduced and firmly established the Soviet republic – a new type of State – infinitely higher and more democratic, than the best of the bourgeois parliamentary republic [sic]. We established the dictature of the proletariat, supported by the poorest peasantry, and have inaugurated a comprehensively planned system of socialist reform.

In the same issue, the *Canadian Forward* reprinted in translation "The Declaration of Rights and Duties of Labouring Humanity," drawn up for adoption by the Fifth Pan-Russian Congress of Soviets.<sup>29</sup> The declaration's description of the dictatorship of the proletariat read:

In establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat and the poorest peasantry the working class resolved to wrest capital from the hands of the bourgeoisie, to unite all the means of production in the hands of the socialistic state and thus to increase as rapidly as possible the mass of productive forces.

The second section of "The Declaration of Rights and Duties of Labouring Humanity" was published under the title "Russian Soviet Republic" on 24 September 1918. It is revealing that this was the last issue of *The Canadian Forward*, and the pressure the paper and its editor Isaac Bainbridge were under may be explained in the translation of the section on the dictatorship of the proletariat:

29. The version published in the *Canadian Forward* is an English translation of a German translation of the Russian-language original published in *Pravda*.



The fundamental problem of the constitution of the Russian Socialistic Federal Republic involves, in view of the present transition period, the establishment of a DICTATORSHIP over the urban and rural proletariat and the poorest peasantry ... the crushing of the bourgeoisie.

The change from the two definitions of the dictatorship of the proletariat found in the 10 September issue is striking, but its cause is difficult to ascertain. It is possible that the bolding in the quotation, the writing of dictatorship in upper case letters, and the dictatorship “of” the proletariat becoming a dictatorship “over” the proletariat is in the German translation, but on balance it seems more likely that this was done by the editor of the paper.<sup>30</sup>

It is difficult to assess the impact of these last issues of the *Canadian Forward* on the thinking of Canadian trade unionists and socialists. State repression had by now precipitated the Social Democratic Party into a tailspin, and the paper reveals that the SDPC’s influence, especially in western Canada, was much diminished from what it had been prior to 1914.<sup>31</sup> The SDPC had become increasingly Ontario-centred, and it is reasonable to believe that the negative impact of the *Canadian Forward*’s misrepresentation of Lenin’s conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat had a greater impact in eastern Canada than in the west. While it is not necessary to fully embrace Bercuson’s argument, it is true that western radicalism had powerful voices in *The Red Flag*, which replaced the *Western Clarion*, the *Western Labour News*, and the *British Columbia Federationist* and that eastern Canada now lacked such voices with the demise of the *Canadian Forward*.

By the time the western labour conferences took place in March 1919, the dictatorship of the proletariat had already become a subject of vigorous debate in the Canadian labour movement, most emphatically west of the Great Lakes. In the *Western Labour News*, the paper of the Winnipeg Trades and Labor Council, an article entitled “The Dictatorship of the Proletariat” appeared on 10 January 1919. D.S. Den argued that the “somewhat superfluous crop of revolutions” that had recently taken place in Europe “was due to the newly-proclaimed principle of the so-called Dictatorship of the Proletariat.” Den asked two questions about the dictatorship of the proletariat: “Is it intrinsically just?” and “Is it politically expedient?” In his critique Den introduced the major objections to the concept that would be increasingly advanced in the coming years of debate and that would frame arguments for and against joining the Communist Party and supporting the Third International. Den attacked Marx’s conception of working-class rule, dismissing it as “a vile and ugly thing which will by no means tend to preserve the purity of our aims and

30. Note as well that taking capital out of the hands of the bourgeoisie has become “crushing” the bourgeoisie.

31. Ian McKay suggests that the SDPC still had 5,000 members in 1918, but the figure is open to question. McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise*, 446. In British Columbia, for example, the party lost one-third of its members within months of the outbreak of World War I. Peter Campbell, *Canadian Marxists and the Search for a Third Way* (Montreal & Kingston 1999), 38–9.

aspirations, but will pollute and profane them.” Den further argued that “the doctrine of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat in a socialist society seems to us a contradiction in terms.” Not missing an opportunity to expose the dictatorship of the proletariat as the dictatorship of a Bolshevik minority, Den claimed that the concept served “as a screen to mask the low ambitions of degraded demagogues.”<sup>32</sup>

The next issue of the *Western Labour News* published two items of relevance to the debate. In the first, an article entitled “The Fundamentals of Bolshevism,” author N.I. Hourich mistakenly claimed that the “great slogan, dictatorship of the proletariat,” was introduced by the Bolsheviks in 1905.<sup>33</sup> Hourich went beyond the misrepresentation of Marx’s conception that Hal Draper details to refute Marx’s authorship of the principle itself. Hourich’s claim revealed the extent to which Marx’s identification of the dictatorship of the proletariat with working-class rule was already being supplanted by its identification with Bolshevik rule in the minds of some North American socialists.<sup>34</sup>

The second, and in some respects the more revealing item in the 17 January 1919 issue of the *Western Labour News*, was a letter to the editor by J. Richmond responding to D.S. Den. In his letter Richmond wrote:

Now the Bolsheviki rule is undoubtedly the dictatorship of the proletariat. However, it is only a temporary state dictated by necessity. It is chiefly due to the existence of powerful counter-revolutionary organizations determined at any cost to crush the new order.

While Richmond, unlike Hourich, did not deny the Marxist origins of the principle, in its defense he replaced Marx’s working-class rule with Bolshevik rule. In refuting Den’s attack on the principle, Richmond did not so much assert the “positive function” of the dictatorship – what Marx in *The Communist Manifesto* calls winning the battle of democracy – as he evoked the “suppressive tasks” function.<sup>35</sup> Even in refutation of D.S. Den’s vitriolic attack on the dictatorship of the proletariat, Richmond traveled a long way toward accepting a definition that had been transformed by the Russian Revolution, and by the opinions of “Leninists” who may not in fact have been true to Lenin.

32. *Western Labour News*, 10 January 1919.

33. “The Fundamentals of Bolshevism” originally appeared in *The Revolutionary Age* on 7 December 1918. *The Revolutionary Age* was launched by American radical Louis Fraina as a vehicle for left-wingers in the Socialist Party of America. N.I. Hourich (Hourwich) was the contributing editor. For Fraina and Hourich see Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana and Chicago 2007), 92, 409n17.

34. Whether or not Hourich was perverting Leninism in this instance is open to debate. At one point in *The State and Revolution* Lenin defined the dictatorship of the proletariat as “the organization of the vanguard of the oppressed as the ruling class.” Was Lenin referring to the Bolshevik Party, or to the informed, activist, revolutionary minority of workers, peasants, soldiers, and sailors? The evidence, on balance, suggests to me that he meant the latter. Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 73.

35. *Western Labour News*, 17 January 1919.

The next week was a crucial one in both Manitoba and British Columbia for understanding the impact of the principle of the dictatorship of the proletariat. On 24 January 1919 the *Western Labour News* carried a front-page article entitled "Storm Breaks Between Reds and Moderates in Trades Council." While it would be invidious to suggest a direct cause-and-effect relationship between the debate about the dictatorship of the proletariat and the increasing radicalization of the Winnipeg Trades and Labor Council, the timing clearly suggests that it was at least a contributing factor. The second point that needs to be made emerges from the simultaneous publication in the *British Columbia Federationist*, the paper of the Vancouver Trades and Labor Council, of an article entitled "Proletarian Dictatorship." Reprinted from the *Butte Bulletin*, the article provided clear insight into the emerging revolutionary consensus around the dictatorship of the proletariat. This would condition acceptance of the concept by the delegates at the two seminal labour conferences, scheduled for March 1919. The January 1919 article stated:

The road to the common happiness of all humanity, the road to the birth of real industrial freedom, the path to the glorious days of the coming world commonwealth is through the dictatorship of the producers, through the power of those who do the work of the world.

While a small minority of Canadian socialists and trade unionists, especially in western Canada, were now defining the dictatorship of the proletariat as Bolshevik rule, in all probability the great majority were not. As Bryan Palmer aptly points out, we are dealing here with a period of "revolutionary innocence."<sup>36</sup> Most Canadian radicals were thinking in terms of the dictatorship's promise, not of its nature, seeing in the dictatorship of the proletariat the end, at long last, of a class system in which the great majority did the work and a ruling class minority reaped the rewards. It was, in effect, an evocation of socialist possibility.

The ninth annual convention of the BC Federation of Labor opened in Calgary, Alberta on Monday, 10 March 1919 with 87 delegates in attendance. In the morning session, Socialist Party of Canada worker intellectual Bill Pritchard introduced a resolution stating:

Therefore, be it resolved, that this convention lay down as its future policy the building up or [sic] organizations of workers on industrial lines for the purpose of enforcing, by virtue of their industrial strength, such demands as such organizations may at any time consider necessary for their continued maintenance and well being, and shall not be, as heretofore, for the purpose of attempting to persuade legislative assemblies to amend, add or take from existing statutes allegedly called labor laws,

And be it further resolved, that the committee on constitution and law be instructed to amend the constitution of the British Columbia Federation of Labor in accordance with the policy herein laid down.<sup>37</sup>

36. Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 351.

37. *The British Columbia Federationist*, 21 March 1919.

Bill Pritchard was no Bolshevik, but on the eve of the Winnipeg General Strike he was no longer willing to accept the existing “democratic” institutions of Canadian society, and was convinced that a new organization of militant industrial unions was necessary to achieve working-class goals in Canadian society.<sup>38</sup> A.S. Wells, secretary of the BC Federation of Labor, agreed with Pritchard that:

we have got to have an industrial organization whereby, when the time comes, when we have reached that point where we are going to take over and operate the wheels of industry, which time we have talked about so long, I say when that time comes, we need an organization which will be of use to us.

Wells added that “we will have to have our industrial organization similar to that which has proven of such benefit in Russia.” In this spirit of resistance, Jack Kavanagh made the first actual reference to the dictatorship of the proletariat: “I find that the transition period of capitalism to the co-operative commonwealth only takes place under the dictatorship of the proletariat, and until that time there can be no transition period in the development from capitalism to a different order of society.”<sup>39</sup>

In the words of Pritchard, Wells, and Kavanagh we find the melding of radical Canadian labour’s espousal of industrial unionism and the influence of the Russian Revolution. At this moment, the promise of socialism was to be found in “soviets,” “councils,” and perhaps most revealingly in the Canadian context, “industrial parliaments.” The “dictatorship of the proletariat” thus embodied a desire to escape the domination of bourgeois rule and to establish, as the article in the *Butte Bulletin* had declared, a society in which the producers were finally in the driver’s seat. There was both Marxist and Leninist influence in, this emerging radical consensus, but Kavanagh’s use of the term “cooperative commonwealth” revealed that the legacy of the radicals of the 17th century English Civil War period remained a presence. The dictatorship of the proletariat leading to the co-operative commonwealth captures a telling moment in the intellectual history of the Canadian left.<sup>40</sup>

38. Bill Pritchard was not, as a number of Canadian labour historians have suggested, a syndicalist who rejected “political action.” McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, 157, states that Pritchard and Kavanagh “led the syndicalist attack on craft unionism and political action,” although elsewhere he is more nuanced in his characterization, identifying them as militant industrial unionists. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men*, 82–83 speaks of “an spc-influenced western Canadian syndicalism.” McCormack and Bercuson are in the company of Communist Party leader Tim Buck, who says of Kavanagh that “his orientation was syndicalist and he denied, belligerently, the contradiction between his actions and Marxism.” Buck, *Lenin and Canada*, 16. Kealey, “1919,” 37n67 refutes the syndicalist “accusation.”

39. *The British Columbia Federationist*, 21 March 1919.

40. At the first national convention of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in Regina in July 1933, Marxists Ernest Winch and William Moriarty argued that the transformation from capitalism to socialism might require the use of violence. Campbell, *Canadian Marxists and the Search for a Third Way*, 64. Penner, *The Canadian Left*, 195–204 explores

For the time being, Kavanagh's definition of the dictatorship of the proletariat held sway. The resolution calling for the adoption of the principle of the dictatorship of the proletariat was drafted by Local 456 of the International Association of Machinists in Victoria, British Columbia:

Whereas, holding the belief in the ultimate supremacy of the working class in matters economic and political, and that the light of modern developments have[sic] proved that the legitimate aspirations of the labor movement are repeatedly obstructed by the existing political forms, clearly showing the capitalistic nature of the parliamentary machinery;

This convention expresses its open conviction that the system of industrial soviet control by selection of representatives from industries is more efficient and of greater political value than the present system of government by selection from district.

This convention declares its full acceptance of the principle of "Proletarian Dictatorship" as being absolute and efficient for the transformation of capitalist private property to public or communal wealth;

The convention sends fraternal greetings to the Russian Soviet government, the Spartacans in Germany and all definite working class movements in Europe and the world, recognizing they have won first place in the history of the class struggle.<sup>41</sup>

The intriguing use of the phrase "absolute and efficient" almost certainly derives from the 10 January 1919 article by D.S. Den in the *Western Labour News*. The term "absolute" is a variant of Den's "intrinsically just," and "efficient" is related to Den's "politically expedient." In using this phrasing, the Victoria machinists' local both refuted Den's critique of the dictatorship of the proletariat and employed the principle of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a means of clearly distinguishing the radical Canadian working class from its reformist brothers and sisters.

The Western Labor Conference began on Thursday, 13 March 1919, the day after the BC Federation of Labor convention ended. During the morning session of the second day of the conference on 14 March 1919, Resolution No. 5, proposed by the BC Federation of Labor, came up for adoption. Once again, this time in an assemblage of more than 230 delegates, the resolution on the dictatorship of the proletariat passed without comment or opposition. At the meeting of the Vancouver Trades and Labor Council held on 20 March 1919, at which the resolution on the dictatorship of the proletariat was presented as part of the report on the two recent conventions, a protest was made against sending greetings to the Bolsheviks and Spartacists of Germany, but there was no objection to adopting the principle of the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>42</sup>

Following the labour conferences of March 1919, the debate concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat focused almost entirely on its implementation by Lenin and the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union. As the Canadian labour

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Marxist influence in the early CCF and on the writing of the Regina Manifesto.

41. One Big Union, *The Origin of the One Big Union* (Winnipeg 1919), 30.

42. *British Columbia Federationist*, 21 March 1919.

and socialist press increasingly turned its attention to the fate of the Russian Revolution and the kind of society Lenin and the Bolsheviks were in the process of creating, the dictatorship of the proletariat continued to function as a litmus test of support for the Russian Revolution. While Reds and Whites waged a brutal civil war in the Soviet Union, it was not difficult for Canadian Marxists to maintain support of the Bolsheviks, attacks on the Leninist vanguard being easily dismissed as bourgeois lies. Nineteen-nineteen may have been an historical moment, but the political and intellectual moment continued into the 1920s, and it took the dictatorship of the proletariat with it. As radical trade unionists and socialists endured withering assaults from government, capital, and conservatives in the mainstream labour movement, they found a number of ways to defend the principle of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the socialist possibility it evoked.

Defending the dictatorship of the proletariat was a never-ending task, made necessary by constant attacks on the principle as being anti-democratic. It will be recalled that in his 10 January 1919 article in the *Western Labour News*, D.S. Den had already observed that “the doctrine of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat in a socialist society seems to us a contradiction in terms.” Indeed, since the late 19th century critics, including Marx’s son-in-law Paul Lafargue, had portrayed the dictatorship of the proletariat as “a special dictatorial authority outside democratic norms.”<sup>43</sup> The argument was a constant refrain employed by the critics of the dictatorship of the proletariat throughout North America and Europe. It gathered momentum in 1918 with the publication of Karl Kautsky’s pamphlet *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*. Kautsky, arguably the most influential Marxist theorist in the world prior to the collapse of the Second International in 1914, based his critique of Lenin on the idea that a fundamental antithesis exists between democratic and dictatorial methods. Lenin and the Bolsheviks, in Kautsky’s estimation, created a “dictatorial” dictatorship of the proletariat, while the dictatorship of the proletariat needed to be understood as “rule on the basis of democracy.”<sup>44</sup> Lenin’s response, *The Proletarian Revolution and Renegade Kautsky*, was also published in 1918. In his rebuttal Lenin rejected Kautsky’s entire mode of argumentation, replying that “democracy” cannot be posited as having a pure essence, but must be understood in relation to class power. History, Lenin wrote, only recognizes bourgeois democracy giving way to proletarian democracy.<sup>45</sup>

While no evidence exists to suggest that Canadian socialists had access to either Kautsky or Lenin’s work early in 1919, Den’s critique reveals that the counterpoising of democracy and dictatorship was already in play. We also know that Canadian Marxists were aware of this juxtaposition, and were willing to defend Lenin’s position. In late March 1919 Percy Chew observed:

43. Draper, *The ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’ From Marx to Lenin*, 43.

44. Karl Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (Girard, Kansas 1920), 51.

45. V.I. Lenin, *The Proletarian Revolution and Renegade Kautsky* (New York 1934), 25.

it will hardly be argued in liberal or socialist circles that a proletarian dictatorship, whose aim is the welfare of the majority, is as objectionable as a monarchist dictatorship the object of which is to perpetuate the exploitation of the many by the few ... To measure the Soviet regime by the fantastic standards of an ideal democracy is idle. A dictatorship inaugurated to emancipate mankind from slavery is a new thing under the sun. Let it not be weighed in old balances.<sup>46</sup>

As Chew's analysis shows, Canadian Marxists had no fears of "dictatorship" in a workers' republic because they believed that they were living in a class society governed by a "bourgeois dictatorship." In a capitalist society "democracy" was a sham concealing the wage slavery of the working class. They were not about to hold Lenin and the Bolsheviks up to the standard of an "ideal democracy" when their entire world view was based on the premise that the class rule of the bourgeoisie made a mockery of genuine democracy.

While the Winnipeg General Strike was in progress in May–June 1919, *The Red Flag* published an article by William Stewart taken from the *Glasgow Forward*. In it Stewart argued that contrary to current opinion, the idea of dictatorship in government was nothing new. He noted:

Nearly every form of what is called Democracy has merely been camouflaged dictatorship, nominally vesting the power of government in the people or in sections of the people, but retaining it actually in the hands of a select minority. In Russia alone has Democracy frankly accepted the responsibilities of Government, and declared itself as the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.<sup>47</sup>

Stewart commented on the exclusion of the bourgeoisie from the dictatorship of the proletariat, noting that:

if the working class should assume the dictatorship, and should in their turn exclude these others, it will doubtless be altogether undemocratic, but it will certainly be according to precedent. And it will have this distinction. For the first time dictatorship will be in the hands of the majority. In the past minorities have dictated.<sup>48</sup>

For Stewart, the issue was not whether the proletarian dictatorship would be "democratic" or "undemocratic;" it was that the dictatorship of the majority represented an historic advance over the longstanding past dictatorships of the minority.

While the Winnipeg General Strike was not an attempt at revolution, it was directed and influenced by men and women who believed that they were living through the transition from capitalism to socialism. As *The Soviet*, the paper of Local #1 of the Socialist Party of Canada in Edmonton, Alberta pointed out, Marx predicted that the working class would become the ruling class during this transition from capitalism to socialism, in which the government of the

46. A.P. Chew, "Bolsheviki Dictatorship," *Western Labor News*, 28 March 1919. Chew had been expelled from the Socialist Party in January 1915 because of his position on the war, and joined the Socialist Democratic Party of Canada.

47. *The Red Flag*, 24 May 1919.

48. *The Red Flag*, 24 May 1919.



workers “cannot be anything else but the dictatorship of the proletariat.”<sup>49</sup> Referring to the Strike Committees in Winnipeg and Toronto, the author noted that the working class had become the ruling class “on a small scale in some Canadian cities.” According to *The Soviet* the issue was not that the Winnipeg General Strike was “declared for the most elementary immediate demands;” the issue was that the “process of the strike, and the logic of its inevitable conflict with the government, cannot fail to drive home the lesson that ... only the overthrow of the capitalist system, and the establishment of Proletariat Dictatorship, can solve the workers’ problems and at the same time forever put an end to the class struggle.”<sup>50</sup> There was no distinction made, in this analogy between the Winnipeg General Strike and the dictatorship of the proletariat, between dictatorship and democracy. Given that the Winnipeg strikers were unarmed, and there was no attempt to suppress the ruling class, this dictatorship was one in which a working-class majority sought to win the battle of democracy.

Socialist Party of Canada worker intellectual Bill Pritchard, who was arrested for his involvement with the Winnipeg General Strike, addressed the dictatorship of the proletariat in his speech to the jury during his trial in January 1920.<sup>51</sup> Pritchard mocked those who found the expression the dictatorship of the proletariat threatening, presenting the dictatorship as part of the evolution from capitalism to socialism. Pritchard argued that the dictatorship of the proletariat “has not for its object the establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat, but the suppression of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.” The proletariat suppressed the bourgeoisie, not in a “dictatorial” manner, but rather as part of a “counter-struggle in self-defense.”<sup>52</sup> The triumph of the dictatorship of the proletariat was assured, according to Pritchard, because it was “simply the practical expression of the will of the people.”<sup>53</sup> The bourgeoisie, in Pritchard’s view, would not be so much crushed, defeated, or annihilated as it would be overwhelmed by working-class democracy, a view not inconsistent with the Lenin of *The State and Revolution*.

49. *The Soviet*, 20 June 1919. The definition of the dictatorship of the proletariat given by *The Soviet* almost certainly comes from *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

50. *The Soviet*, 20 June 1919.

51. It would be more accurate to say that Pritchard was arrested for his non-involvement in the strike. Ian McKay drew my attention to the importance of Pritchard’s thoughts on the dictatorship of the proletariat in his speech to the jury.

52. Pritchard was quoting from Wilhelm Liebknecht’s *No Compromise, No Political Trading*, first published in 1899, and subsequently published a number of times by Charles H. Kerr of Chicago. William A. Pritchard, *Address to the Jury* (Winnipeg 1920), 117. Pritchard echoed the position taken on the Paris Commune in the 19 March 1910 editorial in the *Western Clarion* quoted earlier.

53. Pritchard, *Address to the Jury*, 122.

In the 1919–21 period the “suppressive tasks” function of the dictatorship of the proletariat did not replace, or even overshadow, its function as liberator of the working class. At the BC Federation of Labor Conference in March 1919 Jack Kavanagh, who introduced the principle of the dictatorship of the proletariat, also emphasized the importance of educating the working class as part of the revolutionary transformation of capitalist society.<sup>54</sup> For Canadian Marxists the dictatorship of the proletariat had the double role of worker self-realization and ending ruling class oppression, and was understood in terms of that dialectical relationship. This conception was revealed in *The Red Flag* on the eve of the Winnipeg General Strike, in an article by Dennis E. Batt that had originally appeared in *The Proletarian*, journal of the Proletarian Party of America.<sup>55</sup> Batt noted that “in the inauguration of the dictatorship of the proletariat the workers not only forge an instrument of emancipation but also a weapon to be used against the capitalists until their resistance had died out.”<sup>56</sup> Canadian Marxists understood the dictatorship of the proletariat as “an instrument of emancipation,” the realization of working-class control from below. They were inspired by Marx’s understanding of the Paris Commune, which “contrasted the professionalisation of state functions on the one hand, with their absorption back into society on the other.”<sup>57</sup> Under the dictatorship of the proletariat an educated, organized, and disciplined working class would be required to take on the role in society once performed by state functionaries. For Chris Stephenson, dominion secretary of the Socialist Party of Canada, the dictatorship of the proletariat was “a self-imposed discipline,” the antithesis of the destructive, chaotic, and repressive regime envisioned by its attackers.<sup>58</sup>

The dictatorship of the proletariat continued to be perceived as a vehicle for the emancipation of the working-class majority, and not just among a small extremist minority of the western Canadian left. In 1920 in eastern Canada, in the pages of the *Industrial Banner* published in Toronto, it is possible to find confirmation of support for the Bolsheviks in a paper that supported

54. *The British Columbia Federationist*, 21 March 1919.

55. *The Red Flag*, 3 May 1919. The Proletarian Party emerged from Marxist study groups in the Socialist Party of Michigan. “Its paper, *The Proletarian* was launched in May 1918, and the party was formally organized at a convention in June 1920.” The Proletarian Party focused on worker education and the industrial labour movement, at times being credited with inciting the Flint sit down strike of 1937. The party’s office was moved from Detroit to Chicago in 1925, where it was maintained until 1968.

56. In this period, machinist Dennis Batt, a prominent contributor to *The Proletarian*, was the Executive Secretary of the Proletarian Party of America. The party’s best known member was John Keracher, a Scottish-born speaker, activist, and pamphleteer, author of *How the Gods Were Made, Economics for Beginners, and Producers and Parasites*.

57. Michael Levin, *Marx, Engels and Liberal Democracy* (London 1989), 118.

58. *Western Clarion*, 18 February 1921.

the mainstream labour movement. The *Industrial Banner* offered its readers representations of the Soviet Union that were largely filtered through the impressions of visiting members of the British Labour Party such as George Lansbury, and British author and journalist Arthur Ransome, who became personally close to Lenin and Trotsky. In August 1920 the *Banner* published an article entitled “George Lansbury Describes Lenin,” in which Lansbury wrote of his meeting with Lenin that “we discussed the dictatorship of the proletariat and parliaments, our leaders and the present and future struggles here, and in most things were in agreement.”<sup>59</sup> Lansbury, a “Christian pacifist-socialist,” was supporting the dictatorship of the proletariat in the pages of the *Daily Herald*, influencing trade unionists around the English-speaking world, including Canada.<sup>60</sup>

In western Canada, the dictatorship of the proletariat was receiving more powerful support in the labour press. On 11 June 1920 the *BC Federationist* published an article entitled “Parliament or Soviets?” a statement by chairman Gregory Zinoviev on behalf of the executive committee of the Third International. In his statement, Zinoviev described the dictatorship of the proletariat as “the chief feature of the Soviet system,” and argued that it should have “general recognition and support.” Zinoviev claimed that the communists would “use the parliaments only for the propagation of our Communist ideas, and, being strong enough, we will pull down altogether all their ‘democratism.’”<sup>61</sup> Canadian socialists and trade unionists who participated in the March 1919 labour conferences and their supporters had little to disagree with in Zinoviev’s views. Indeed, Canadian socialists had been campaigning for elected office in Canadian legislatures for two decades in order to propagandize for socialism within the walls of parliament and expose the bourgeoisie’s sham democracy.<sup>62</sup>

By the fall of 1920 even some Canadian Marxists had begun to have doubts about the dictatorship of the proletariat in the Soviet Union, as the idealism of *The State and Revolution* was being cast in the shadow of unfolding events. John Tyler asked in the pages of the *Western Clarion* if the Bolsheviks had created “a dictatorship of a small section of the working class over the great mass of the workers?”<sup>63</sup> Tyler was concerned about “the dangers of minority

59. *Industrial Banner*, 20 August 1920. George Lansbury (1859–1940) visited the Soviet Union in 1920 as the editor of the *Daily Herald*, England’s largest circulation labour daily newspaper. Lansbury, the grandfather of actress Angela Lansbury, was a Labour MP, 1910–12, 1922–40, and Labour Party leader 1932–35. Lansbury, who as editor of the *Daily Herald* opposed armed intervention in the Soviet Union, described Lenin as “the best loved and best hated man in the world.”

60. Julius Braunthal, *History of the International, 1914–1943, Volume 2* (London 1967), 183.

61. *BC Federationist*, 11 June 1920.

62. McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise*, 168.

63. John Tyler, “Is It the Dictatorship of the Proletariat?” *Western Clarion*, 1 October 1920.

rule,” a long-standing concern in a Socialist Party of Canada whose conception of the revolution was rooted in the education and self-emancipation of a working-class majority. The title of Tyler’s article, “Is It the Dictatorship of the Proletariat?,” revealed that the moment of conceiving of the dictatorship of the proletariat as embodying socialist possibility was passing, the focus increasingly shifting to its composition and direction.

In November 1920 John Amos “Jack” McDonald of the Socialist Party of Canada published a key article on the dictatorship of the proletariat entitled “On Copying the Bolsheviki.”<sup>64</sup> In offering critical support to Lenin and the Bolsheviks, McDonald appeared to break with Marx by identifying the dictatorship of the proletariat with a “militant, Marxian minority.” McDonald, who did not become a member of the Communist Party, did not insist that the revolutionary transformation needed to be carried out by a majority; he argued, instead, that the Bolsheviks could not wait until a majority of the Russian people embraced the revolution. McDonald thus strayed from Marx by identifying the proletarian dictatorship with a militant minority, but he was not willing to extend this definition to countries outside the Soviet Union.

In her classic work “The Russian Revolution,” Rosa Luxemburg wrote of Lenin and the Bolsheviks:

By their determined revolutionary stand, their exemplary strength in action, and their unbreakable loyalty to international socialism, they have contributed whatever could possibly be contributed under such devilishly hard conditions. The danger begins only when they make a virtue of necessity and want to freeze into a complete theoretical system all the tactics forced upon them by these fatal circumstances, and want to recommend them to the international proletariat as a model of socialist tactics.<sup>65</sup>

Jack McDonald in Canada, like Rosa Luxemburg in Germany, would not accept turning necessity into principle in countries outside the Soviet Union. He was not willing to concede a conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat determined by Soviet conditions. If capitalism had a greater hold on the minds of the masses in western capitalist democracies than it had in Russia, the answer was working-class education, not creating a dictatorship of the

64. John Amos “Jack” McDonald was born into a family of eight on a Prince Edward Island potato farm in the late 1880s, and was struck down by a car in Oakland, California in 1968. Joining the Socialist Party of Canada early in the 20th century, McDonald wrote for the *Western Clarion* and served on the Dominion Executive Committee of the spc during World War I. McDonald’s influence extended to Australia and New Zealand, where he gave a series of talks in 1921–22. In later years he ran a well known left-wing bookstore in Oakland. McDonald is not to be confused with “Moscow Jack” MacDonald, leading Communist Party of Canada militant in the 1920s. For spc Jack McDonald see Peter Newell, *The Impossibilists: A Brief Profile of the Socialist Party of Canada* (London 2008), 185–88, 192–93, 208–09; Kerry Taylor, “‘Jack’ McDonald: A Canadian Revolutionary in New Zealand,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 32 (Fall 1993), 261–68; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 July 1968.

65. Rosa Luxemburg, “The Russian Revolution,” in Mary Alice Waters, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (New York 1970), 394.

proletariat on the Soviet model.<sup>66</sup> For McDonald and like-minded Marxists, a dictatorship of the proletariat based in a militant minority could only be a situational necessity, believing as they did that Marx “was convinced that the socialist revolution would *normally* come about with the support of a secure majority of the masses of people.”<sup>67</sup>

Fellow Socialist Party of Canada member Alex McKenzie responded to McDonald’s position, taking offense at McDonald’s claim that there were ways in which the Bolshevik Revolution had a negative effect on the working-class movement in other countries. McKenzie was not opposed to working-class education but believed that the Socialist Party of Canada must adopt “more vigorous means” or give way to a “more virile movement.”<sup>68</sup> McKenzie argued that revolutions *must* of necessity be fomented by minorities, given capitalism’s hold on the minds of the masses.<sup>69</sup> Here McKenzie, in a debate centred on the dictatorship of the proletariat, set out a critique of the Socialist Party of Canada that has remained central to both the Communist Party of Canada and Trotskyist organizations through the 20th and into the 21st centuries.<sup>70</sup>

Jack McDonald’s position remains powerfully relevant. The contradictions in his position notwithstanding, it is crucially important to note that McDonald’s understanding of the dictatorship of the proletariat remained closely tied to his understanding of the Paris Commune; he did not see a fundamental difference between the Commune and the dictatorship of the proletariat in the Soviet Union.<sup>71</sup> Nor, apparently, did Lenin, the most likely author of the Twenty-One Conditions whose acceptance was required for affiliation to the Communist International.<sup>72</sup> Those conditions lead with the stipulation that:

The dictatorship of the proletariat should not be spoken of simply as a current well-learned formula; it must be propagated in such a way that its necessity for each rank and file workman,

66. J.A. McDonald, “On Copying the Bolsheviks,” *Western Clarion*, 16 November 1920.

67. Draper, *The “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” from Marx to Lenin*, 82.

68. “A Controversy,” *Western Clarion*, 16 December 1920. This was not just an “academic” debate within the Socialist Party of Canada. On 17 December 1920 the *British Columbia Federationist*, the paper of the Vancouver Trades and Labor Council, announced an open forum for that day to be held at the Pender Hall, Vancouver. The talk, given by speaker Jack Harrington, was entitled “What is the Dictatorship of the Proletariat?”

69. “McKenzie Continues the Criticism of J.A. McD’s Article ‘On Copying the Bolsheviks,’” *Western Clarion*, 1 January 1921.

70. Communist Party of Canada, *Canada’s Party of Socialism: History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1921–1976* (Toronto 1982), 5; Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montreal 1981), 113.

71. J.A. McDonald, “On Copying the Bolsheviks,” *Western Clarion*, 16 November 1920.

72. According to James W. Hulse, *The Forming of the Communist International* (Stanford, California 1964), 205, the author of the conditions was “probably Lenin.”

workwoman, soldier, or peasant should follow from every day facts, systematically recorded by our press day by day.<sup>73</sup>

While attention has traditionally focused on the fact that the First Condition also calls on all communists to denounce the bourgeoisie and reformists, less attention has been paid to Lenin's attempt to retain Marx's definition of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Not only is the dictatorship presented as a dictatorship from below, but it is also presented in the form of Marx's understanding of the Paris Commune. The last phrase – "systematically recorded by our press day by day" – is without doubt inspired by Marx's observation that the Commune "published its doings and sayings, it initiated the public into all its shortcomings."<sup>74</sup>

Lenin, in effect, does not appear to have been entirely comfortable with the conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat that he felt compelled to advocate in the context of a brutal civil war. As Samuel Farber points out, by 1919 Lenin was advocating one-party dictatorship, rejecting the distinction between the dictatorship of the party and the dictatorship of a class.<sup>75</sup> Lenin frankly acknowledged that the whole proletariat could not exercise the dictatorship of the proletariat, only the vanguard.<sup>76</sup> As Paul Le Blanc points out, Lenin and his comrades asserted a "false identification of Marx's notion of "dictatorship of the proletariat" not with its actual meaning (political domination of the state by the working class, in fact a *workers' democracy*) but rather with one-party rule by the Bolsheviks (renamed "Communists" in 1918)."<sup>77</sup> This was the reality in the Soviet Union, but the wording of the first point in the Twenty-One Conditions suggests that it was not necessarily the definition of the dictatorship of the proletariat Lenin wanted revolutionaries elsewhere in the world to adopt. Lenin had not entirely abandoned the spirit of *The State and Revolution*, not yet discarded the understanding of the dictatorship of the proletariat advanced by Marx and Engels in their writings on the Paris Commune. Canadian Marxists like Jack McDonald did not support the Communist International or join the Canadian Communist Party, but they may have had insights into Lenin's intent that were missed by those who did.

As the SPC debate over the dictatorship of the proletariat between McDonald and McKenzie unfolded, the Twenty-One Conditions for affiliating to the Communist International were printed in the *Western Clarion*. McDonald may have been truer to the spirit of Marx, but by January 1921 the supporters of affiliation to the Comintern were moving with the tide of history. Critical

73. *Western Clarion*, 1 January 1921.

74. Karl Marx and V.I. Lenin, *Civil War in France: The Paris Commune* (New York 1968), 67.

75. Samuel Farber, *Before Stalinism: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy* (Cambridge 1990), 28.

76. Neil Harding, *Leninism* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London 1996), 16.

77. Paul Le Blanc, *Marx, Lenin, and the Revolutionary Experience* (New York 2006), 115.



support for the Soviet Union, and nuanced understandings of the dictatorship of the proletariat, were no longer possible as the moment of socialist possibility began to be overtaken by concrete identification with the Bolshevik Revolution. As the Canadian labour and socialist movements polarized, the debate about the dictatorship of the proletariat increasingly became reduced to one of support for, or opposition to, the Soviet Union.

By this point Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, had taken upon himself the task of rescuing the North American labour movement from the clutches of the Bolsheviks. In his addresses to the annual conventions of the AFL, Gompers vehemently opposed recognition of the Soviet Union and the negotiation of trade agreements.<sup>78</sup> While Gompers' antipathy to the Soviet Union is well known to Canadian and American labour historians, less well known is the extent to which it was based on a critique of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In the spring of 1921, the Toronto-based *Industrial Banner* published a letter written by Gompers that was widely distributed to North American unions, labour federations, and the labour press. In it, Gompers claimed to quote from a "recent pronouncement" by Lenin demonstrating the true nature of the Soviet regime:

We ourselves have never talked of liberty. All we have said is 'dictatorship of the proletariat.' ... In Russia the working class, properly so-called, is in a minority. That minority is imposing its will and will continue to do so as long as other elements in society resist the economic conditions that communism lays down ... I should say from forty to fifty years.<sup>79</sup>

For trade unionists affiliated with the Canadian Trades and Labor Congress and the AFL, Gompers thus created the spectre of a Bolshevik dictatorship extending decades into the future, threatening the hard-won gains of the "safe and sane" labour movement.

On the other side of the barricade was the One Big Union, the organizational manifestation of the moment of March 1919, its very *raison d'être* being rejection of the craft orientation of the American Federation of Labor.<sup>80</sup> Commenting on Gompers' re-election as president of the "most reactionary labor organization in the world" in the summer of 1922, the *OBU Bulletin* claimed that it was "the proud distinction" of the AFL "to brand the workers' revolution as murderous and tyrannical and to heap far more abuse upon it than has been done by most capitalist governments." The article took Gompers to task for contrasting the American Revolution, which stood for "freedom, justice and humanity," with the Russian Revolution, which had ostensibly established a "brutal, tyrannical and unjust dictatorship." Concluding its attack, the article condemned Gompers for saying that "instead of being a dictatorship of the

78. Bernard Mandel, *Samuel Gompers* (Yellow Springs, Ohio 1963), 512.

79. *Industrial Banner*, 29 April 1921.

80. For the One Big Union see Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men*; Larry Peterson, "The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism, 1900–1925," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (Spring 1981), 41–66.



proletariat, it was a dictatorship over the proletariat.”<sup>81</sup> In the summer of 1922, the *Canadian Forward's* September 1918 misrepresentation of the dictatorship of the proletariat was still being opposed in the Winnipeg-based One Big Union's defense of its original meaning.

By the fall of 1922 there was not much doubt that the richness and complexity of the debate of the preceding three years on the Canadian left was now a thing of the past. On the fifth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, the paper of the Communist Party of Canada set out what the dictatorship of the proletariat had come to be perceived as in Canada's leading revolutionary party:

The experience of the Russian Revolution should be ample proof to the workers of all capitalist countries that the exploiting classes will never give up their position without a fierce struggle, and that the Communist revolution will be met by the most ruthless opposition from the exploiters. Therefore, the working class in any country, in a period of revolution, can only be successful by exercising a merciless dictatorship over all their enemies. The chief purpose of a working class dictatorship is to deprive the capitalists of their freedom so that they will have not the slightest chance of defeating the workers. The degree of severity of a dictatorship will be determined by the amount of resistance of the exploiters, and it will last just as long as the exploiters resist.<sup>82</sup>

Marx's chief purpose for the dictatorship of the proletariat, winning the battle of democracy, had become the necessity of crushing all enemies of the revolution. The dictatorship “of” the proletariat had become a dictatorship “over” the bourgeoisie, rupturing Marx's dialectical conceptualization and the understanding that informed Canadian socialists in the moment of 1919. On the eve of Stalin's rise to power in the Soviet Union, the socialist possibility embodied by Marx's conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat was about to undergo its most severe trial.

At the BC Federation of Labor and Western Labor conferences in Calgary, Alberta in March 1919, Canadian labour delegates supported a concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat fundamentally based in the ending of class privilege by an educated, organized, and enlivened working class freed from wage slavery and bourgeois domination. That revolutionary intent was the product of a moment of socialist possibility, a moment in which many, if not most, Canadian revolutionaries believed that they were living through the transformation from capitalism to socialism. To argue that the Winnipeg General Strike and the sympathetic strikes that it inspired were not attempts at revolution, but rather a fight for better wages and working conditions, in no way erases from the historical actuality of 1919 this moment of socialist possibility.

Far from being an obscure, irrelevant concept, the dictatorship of the proletariat opens up new avenues of thought and enquiry into Canadian working-class history. Understanding its impact moves us beyond the polarized debate between the exponents and critics of “western exceptionalism” to

81. *One Big Union Bulletin*, 29 June 1922.

82. *The Worker*, 1 November 1922.

a realization that both schools of thought contain insights. It is true, as David Bercuson argues, that the Western Canadian working class was more radical; it is beyond question that the debate concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat was of longer duration, greater intellectual depth, and more powerful import in the west than in the east. The paradox, of course, is that this western radicalism was permeated by the very international intellectual influences that the western exceptionalist paradigm seeks to minimize, if not eradicate. It is not possible to deny either the revolutionary moment of 1919, pregnant as it was with socialist possibility, or the contribution of Canadian radicals such as Jack McDonald and Chris Stephenson to the defense of what was best in Marx's conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In the labour revolt of 1919, they embodied his vision of a better world in birth.

*Writing on the dictatorship of the proletariat in the 21st century is not conducive to feeling intellectually relevant. It is, nonetheless, a way to realize that there is still a band of brothers and sisters out there who remain committed to a socialist future. Ian Angus, Ian McKay, and David Frank moved me to think about moments of possibility and to rethink Lenin and the Russian Revolution. The reviewers, in the spirit of Marx and Engels, questioned everything; the end result is much the stronger for it. Many thanks to Bryan and the staff at Labour /Le Travail for providing a place where these debates still matter. And a "yours in revolt" to old forgotten Marxists, whose words and actions continue to amaze and to inspire.*

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Unit 5	org
25 Horsell Road	www.cseweb.org.uk
London N5 1XL	Tel & Fax: 020 7607 9615
	Skype: cseoffice