1. Our Differences

For several years past, profound tactical disagreement has been developing on a succession of issues amongst those who had previously shared common ground as Marxists and together fought against Revisionism in the name of the radical tactic of class struggle. It first came into the open in 1910, in the debate between Kautsky and Luxemburg over the mass strike; then came the dissension over imperialism and the question of disarmament; and finally, with the conflict over the electoral deal made by the Party Executive and the attitude to be adopted towards the liberals, the most important issues of parliamentary politics became the subject of dispute.

One may regret this fact, but no party loyalty can conjure it away; we can only throw light upon it, and this is what the interest of the party demands. On the one hand, the causes of the dissension must be identified, in order to show that it is natural and necessary; and on the other, the content of the two perspectives, their most basic principles and their most far-reaching implications, must be extracted from the formulations of the two sides, so that party comrades can orientate themselves and choose between them; this is only possible through theoretical discussion.

The source of the recent tactical disagreements is clear to see: under the influence of the modern forms of capitalism, new forms of action have developed in the labour movement, namely mass action. When they first made their appearance, they were welcomed by all Marxists and hailed as a sign of revolutionary development, a product of our revolutionary tactics. But as the practical potential of mass action developed, it began to pose new problems; the question of social revolution, hitherto an unattainably distant ultimate goal, now became a live issue for the militant proletariat, and the tremendous difficulties involved became clear to everyone, almost as a matter of personal experience. This gave rise to two trends of thought: the one took up the problem of revolution, and by analysing the effectiveness, significance and potential of the new forms of action, sought to grasp how the proletariat would be able to fulfil its mission; the other, as if shrinking before the magnitude of this prospect, groped among the older, parliamentary forms of action in search of tendencies which would for the time being make it possible to postpone tackling the task. The new methods of the labour movement have given rise to an ideological split among those who previously advocated radical Marxist party-tactics.

In these circumstances it is our duty as Marxists to clarify the differences as far as possible by means of theoretical discussion. This is why, in our article “Mass action and revolution”, we outlined the process of revolutionary development as a reversal of the relations of class power to provide a basic statement of our perspective, and attempted to clarify the differences between our views and those of Kautsky in a critique of two articles by him. In his reply, Kautsky shifted the issue on to a different terrain: instead of Contesting the validity of theoretical formulations, he
accused us of wanting to force new tactics upon the party. In the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* of 9 September, we showed that this turned the whole purpose of our argument on its head.

We had attempted, insofar as it was possible, to clarify the distinctions between the *three* tendencies, two radical and one Revisionist, which now confront each other in the party. Comrade Kautsky seems to have missed the point of this entire analysis, since he remarks testily: “Pannekoek sees my thinking as pure Revisionism.”

What we were arguing was on the contrary that Kautsky’s position is not Revisionist. For the very reason that many comrades misjudged Kautsky because they were preoccupied with the radical-Revisionist dichotomy of previous debates, and wondered if he was gradually turning Revisionist — for this very reason it was necessary to speak out and grasp Kautsky’s practice in terms of the particular nature of his radical position. Whereas Revisionism seeks to limit our activity to parliamentary and trade-union campaigns, to the achievement of reforms and improvements which will evolve naturally into socialism — a perspective which serves as the basis for reformist tactics aimed solely at short-term gains — radicalism stresses the inevitability of the revolutionary struggle for the conquest of power that lies before us, and therefore directs its tactics towards raising class consciousness and increasing the power of the proletariat. It is over the nature of this revolution that our views diverge. As far as Kautsky is concerned, it is an event in the future, a political apocalypse, and all we have to do meanwhile is prepare for the final show-down by gathering our strength and assembling and drilling our troops. In our view, revolution is a *process*, the first stages of which we are now experiencing, for it is only by the struggle for power itself that the masses can be assembled, drilled and formed into an organisation capable of taking power. These different conceptions lead to completely different evaluations of current practice; and it is apparent that the Revisionists’ rejection of any revolutionary action and Kautsky’s postponement of it to the indefinite future are bound to unite them on many of the current issues over which they both oppose us.

This is not of course to say that these currents form distinct, conscious groups in the party: to some extent they are no more than conflicting trends of thought. Nor does it mean a blurring of the distinction between Kautskian radicalism and Revisionism, merely a rapprochement which will nevertheless become more and more pronounced as the inner logic of development asserts itself, for radicalism that is real and yet passive cannot but lose its mass base. Necessary as it was to keep to traditional methods of struggle in the period when the movement was first developing, the time was bound to come when the proletariat would aspire to transform its heightened awareness of its own potential into the conquest of decisive new positions of strength. The mass actions in the struggle for suffrage in Prussia testify to this determination. Revisionism was itself an expression of this aspiration to achieve positive results as the fruit of growing power; and despite the disappointments and failures it has brought, it owes its influence primarily to the notions that radical party-tactics simply mean waiting passively without making definite gains and that Marxism is a doctrine of fatalism. The proletariat cannot rest from the struggle for fresh advances; those who are not prepared to lead this struggle on a revolutionary course will, whatever their intentions, be inexorably pushed further and further along the reformist path of pursuing positive gains by means of particular parliamentary tactics and bargains with other parties.
2. Class and Masses

We argued that Comrade Kautsky had left his Marxist analytical tools at home in his analysis of action by the masses, and that the inadequacy of his method was apparent from the fact that he failed to come to any definite conclusion. Kautsky replies: “Not at all. I came to the very definite conclusion that the unorganised masses in question were highly unpredictable in character.” And he refers to the shifting sands of the desert as similarly unpredictable. With all due respect to this illustration, we must nevertheless stand by our argument. If, in analysing a phenomenon, you find that it takes on various forms and is entirely unpredictable, that merely proves that you have not found the real basis determining it. If, after studying the position of the moon, for example, someone “came to the very definite conclusion” that it sometimes appears in the north-east, sometimes in the south and sometimes in the west, in an entirely arbitrary and unpredictable fashion, then everyone would rightly say that this study was fruitless — though it may of course be that the force at work cannot yet be identified. The investigator would only have deserved criticism if he had completely ignored the method of analysis which, as he perfectly well knew, was the only one which could produce results in that field.

This is how Kautsky treats action by the masses. He observes that the masses have acted in different ways historically, sometimes in a reactionary sense, sometimes in a revolutionary sense, sometimes remaining passive, and comes to the conclusion that one cannot build on this shifting, unpredictable foundation. But what does Marxist theory tell us? That beyond the limits of individual variation, — that is where the masses are concerned — the actions of men are determined by their material situation, their interests and the perspectives arising from the latter and that these, making allowances for the weight of tradition, are different for the different classes. If we are to comprehend the behaviour of the masses, then, we must make clear distinctions between the various classes: the actions of a lumpenproletarian mass, a peasant mass and a modern proletarian mass will be entirely different. Of course Kautsky could come to no conclusion by throwing them all together indiscriminately; the cause of his failure to find a basis for prediction, however, lies not in the object of his historical analysis, but in the inadequacy of the methods he has used.

Kautsky gives another reason for disregarding the class character of the masses of today: as a combination of various classes, they have no class character:

“On p. 45 of my article, I examined what elements might potentially be involved in action of this kind in Germany today. My finding was that, disregarding children and the agricultural population, one would have to reckon with some thirty million people, only about a tenth of whom would be organised workers. The rest would be made up of unorganised workers, for the most part still infected with the thinking of the peasantry, the petty-bourgeoisie and the lumpenproletariat, together with a good many members of the latter two strata themselves.

Even after Pannekoek’s reproaches, I still do not see how a unified class character can be attributed to such motley masses. It is not that I ‘left my Marxism at home’, I never possessed such ‘analytic tools’. Comrade Pannekoek clearly thinks the essence of Marxism consists in seeing a particular class, namely the class-conscious, industrial wage-proletariat, wherever masses are involved.”

Kautsky is not doing himself justice here. In order to legitimate a momentary lapse, he generalises it, and without justification. He claims that he has never possessed the Marxist “analytical tools”
capable of identifying the class character of these “motley masses” — he says “unified”, — but what is at issue is obviously the predominant class character, the character of the class that makes up the majority and whose perspectives and interests are decisive, as is the case today with the industrial proletariat. But he is doing himself wrong; for this same mass, made all the more motley by the addition of the rural population, arises in the context of parliamentary politics. And all the writers of the Social-Democratic Party set out from the principle that the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat forms the basic content of its parliamentary politics, that the perspectives and interests of wage-labour govern all its policies and represent the perspectives and interests of the people as a whole. Does that which holds good for the masses in the field of parliamentary politics suddenly cease to apply as soon as they turn to mass action?

On the contrary, the proletarian class character comes out all the more clearly in mass action. Where parliamentary politics are concerned, the whole country is involved, even the most isolated villages and hamlets; how densely the population is concentrated has no bearing. But it is mainly the masses pressed together in the big cities who engage in mass action; and according to the most recent official statistics, the population of the 42 major cities of Germany is made up of 15.8 per cent self-employed, 9.1 per cent clerical employees and 75.0 per cent workers, disregarding the 25 per cent to whom no precise occupation can be attributed. If we also note that in 1907 15 per cent of the German labour-force worked in small concerns, 29 per cent in medium-scale concerns and 56 per cent in large-scale and giant concerns, we see how firmly the character of the wage-labourer employed in large-scale industry is stamped upon the masses likely to participate in mass action. If Kautsky can only see motley masses, it is firstly because he counts the wives of organised workers as belonging to the twenty-seven million not organised, and secondly because he denies the proletarian class character of those workers who are not organised or who have still not shrugged off bourgeois traditions. We therefore re-emphasise that what counts in the development of these actions, in which the deepest interests and passions of the masses break surface, is not membership of the organisation, nor a traditional ideology, but to an ever-increasing extent the real class character of the masses.

It now becomes clear what relationship our methods bear each other. Kautsky denounces my method as “over-simplified Marxism”; I am once again asserting that his is neither over-simplified nor over-sophisticated, but not Marxist at all. Any science seeking to investigate an area of reality must start by identifying the main factors and basic underlying forces in their simplest form; this first simple image is then filled out, improved and made more complex as further details, secondary causes and less direct influences are brought in to correct it, so that it approximates more and more closely to reality. Let us take as an illustration Kautsky’s analysis of the great French revolution. Here we find as a first approximation the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the feudal classes; an outline of these main factors, the general validity of which cannot be disputed, could be described as “over-simplified Marxism”. In his pamphlet of 1889, Kautsky analysed the subdivisions within those classes, and was thus able to improve and deepen this first simple sketch significantly. The Kautsky of 1912, however, would maintain that there was no kind of unity to the character of the motley masses which made up the contemporary Third Estate; and that it would be pointless to expect definite actions and results from it. This is how matters stand in this case — except that the situation is more complicated because the future is involved, and the classes of today have to try and locate the forces determining it. As a first approximation aimed at gaining an initial
general perspective, we must come down to the basic feature of the capitalist world, the struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat, the two principal classes; we attempted to outline the process of revolution as a development of the power-relations between them. We are, of course, perfectly well aware that reality is much more complex, and that many problems remain to be resolved before we comprehend it: we must to some extent await the lessons of practice in order to do so. The bourgeoisie is no more unified a class than the proletariat; tradition still influences both of them; and among the mass of the people there are also the lumpenproletarians, petty-bourgeois, and clerical employees whose actions are inevitably determined by their particular class situations. But since they only form admixtures insufficiently important to obscure the basic wage-proletarian character of the masses, the above is merely a qualification which does not refute the initial outline, but rather elaborates it. The collaboration of various tendencies in the form of a debate is necessary to master and clarify these issues. Need we say that we were counting on the author of the Class Conflicts of 1789 to indicate the problems and difficulties still to be resolved in his criticisms of our initial sketch? But the Kautsky of 1912 declares it beyond his competence to assist in this, the most important question facing the militant proletariat, that of identifying the forces which will shape its coming revolutionary struggle, on the grounds that he does not know how a “unified class character” can be attributed to “such motley masses” as the proletarian masses of today.

3. The Organisation

In our article in the Leipziger Volkszeitung, we maintained that Kautsky had without justification taken our emphasis on the essential importance of the spirit of organisation to mean that we consider the organisation itself unnecessary. What we had said was that irrespective of all assaults upon the external forms of association, the masses in which this spirit dwells will always regroup themselves in new organisations; and if, in contrast to the view he expressed at the Dresden party congress in 1903, Kautsky now expects the state to refrain from attacking the workers’ organisations, this optimism can only be based upon the spirit of organisation which he so scorns.

The spirit of organisation is in fact the active principle which alone endows the framework of organisation with life and energy. But this immortal soul cannot float ethereally in the kingdom of heaven like that of Christian theology; it continually recreates an organisational form for itself, because it brings together the men in whom it lives for the purpose of joint, organised action. This spirit is not something abstract or imaginary by contrast with the prevailing form of association, the “concrete” organisation, but is just as concrete and real as the latter. It binds the individual persons which make up the organisation more closely together than any rules or statutes can do, so that they no longer scatter as disparate atoms when the external bond of rules and statutes is severed. If organisations are able to develop and take action as powerful, stable, united bodies, if neither joining battle nor breaking off the engagement, neither struggle nor defeat can crack their solidarity, if all their members see it as the most natural thing in the world to put the common interest before their own individual interest, they do not do so because of the rights and obligations entailed in the statutes, nor because of the magic power of the organisation’s funds or its democratic constitution: the reason for all this lies in the proletariat’s sense of organisation, the profound transformation that its character has undergone. What Kautsky has to say about the powers which the organisation has at its disposal is all very well: the quality of the arms which the proletariat forges for itself gives it self-confidence and a sense of its own capabilities, and there is no disagreement between us as to
the need for the workers to equip themselves as well as possible with powerful centralised associations that have adequate funds at their disposal. But the virtue of this machinery is dependent upon the readiness of the members to sacrifice themselves, upon their discipline within the organisation, upon their solidarity towards their comrades, in short, upon the fact that they have become completely different persons from the old individualistic petty-bourgeois and peasants. If Kautsky sees this new character, this spirit of organisation, as a product of organisation, then in the first place there need be no conflict between this view and our own, and in the second place it is only half correct; for this transformation of human nature in the proletariat is primarily the effect of the conditions under which the workers live, trained as they are to act collectively by the shared experience of exploitation in the same factory, and secondarily a product of class struggle, that is to say militant action on the part of the organisation; it would be difficult to argue that such activities as electing committees and counting subscriptions make much contribution in this respect.

It immediately becomes clear what constitutes the essence of proletarian organisation if we consider exactly what distinguishes a trade union from a whist club, a society for the prevention of cruelty to animals or an employers’ association. Kautsky obviously does not do so, and sees no difference of principle between them; hence he puts the “yellow associations”, which employers compel their workers to join, on a par with the organisations of the militant proletariat. He does not recognise the world-transforming significance of the proletarian organisation. He feels able to accuse us of disdain for the organisation: in reality he values it far less than we do. What distinguishes the workers’ organisations from all others is the development of solidarity within them as the basis of their power, the total subordination of the individual to the community, the essence of a new humanity still in the process of formation. The proletarian organisation brings unity to the masses, previously fragmented and powerless, moulding them into an entity with a conscious purpose and with power in its own right. It lays the foundations of a humanity which governs itself, decides its own destiny, and as the first step in that direction, throws off alien oppression. In it there grows up the only agency which can abolish the class hegemony of exploitation; the development of the proletarian organisation in itself signifies the repudiation of all the functions of class rule; it represents the self-created order of the people, and it will fight relentlessly to throw back and put an end to the brutal intervention and despotic attempts at repression which the ruling minority undertakes. It is within the proletarian organisation that the new humanity grows, a humanity now developing into a coherent entity for the first time in the history of the world; production is developing into a unified world economy, and the sense of belonging together is concurrently growing between men, the firm solidarity and fraternity which bind them together as one organism ruled by a single will.

As far as Kautsky is concerned, the organisation consists only in the “real, concrete” association or club formed by the workers for some practical goal in their own interests and held together only by the external bonds of rules and statutes, just like an employers’ association or a grocers’ mutual-aid society. If this external bond is broken, the whole thing fragments into so many isolated individuals and the organisation disappears. It is understandable that a conception of this kind leads Kautsky to paint the external dangers threatening the organisation in such sombre colours and warn so energetically against injudicious “trials of strength” which bring demoralisation, mass desertion and the collapse of the organisation in their train. At this level of generalisation there can be no objection to his warnings: nobody wants injudicious trials of strength. Nor are the unfortunate
consequences of a defeat a fantasy on his part; they correspond to the experience of a young labour movement. When the workers first discover organisation, they expect great things of it, and enter into battle full of enthusiasm; but if the contest is lost, they often turn their backs upon the organisation in despondency and discouragement, because they regard it only from the direct, practical perspective, as an association bringing immediate benefits, and the new spirit has yet to take firm root in them. But what a different picture greets us in the mature labour movement that is setting its stamp ever more distinctly upon the most advanced countries! Again and again we see with what tenacity the workers stick to their organisations, we see how neither defeat nor the most vicious terrorism from the upper classes can induce them to abandon the organisation. They see in the organisation not merely a society formed for purposes of convenience, they feel rather that it is their only strength, their only recourse, that without the organisation they are powerless and defenceless, and this consciousness rules their every action as despotically as an instinct of self-preservation.

This is not yet true of all workers, of course, but it is the direction in which they are developing; this new character is growing stronger and stronger in the proletariat. And the dangers painted so black by Kautsky are therefore becoming of increasingly little moment. Certainly the struggle has its dangers, but it is nevertheless the organisation’s element, the only environment in which it can grow and develop internal strength. We know of no strategy that can bring only victories and no defeats; however cautious we may be, setbacks and defeats can only be completely avoided by quitting the field without a fight, and this would in most cases be worse than a defeat. We must be prepared for our advances to be only too often brought to a halt by defeat, with no way of avoiding battle. When well-meaning leaders hold forth on the serious consequences of defeat, the workers are therefore able to retort: “Do you think that we, for whom the organisation has become flesh and blood, who know and feel that the organisation is more to us than our very lives — for it represents the life and future of our class — that simply because of a defeat we shall straightway lose confidence in the organisation and run off? Certainly, a whole section of the masses who flooded to us in attack and victory will drift away again when we suffer a reverse; but this only means that we can count on wider support for our actions than the steadily growing phalanx of our unflinching fighting battalions.”

This contrast between Kautsky’s views and our own also makes it clear how it is that we differ so sharply in our evaluation of the organisation even though we share the same theoretical matrix. It is simply that our perspectives correspond to different stages in the development of the organisation, Kautsky’s to the organisation in its first flowering, ours to a more mature level of development. This is why he considers the external form of organisation to be what is essential and believes that the whole organisation is lost if this form suffers. This is why he takes the transformation of the proletarian character to be the consequence of organisation, rather than its essence. This is why he sees the main characterological effect of organisation upon the worker in the confidence and self-restraint brought by the material resources of the collectivity — in other words, the funds. This is why he warns that the workers will turn their backs upon the organisation in demoralisation if it suffers a major defeat. All this corresponds to the conception one would derive from observing the organisation in its initial stages of development. The arguments that he puts against us do, therefore, have a basis in reality; but we claim a greater justification for our perspective in that it belongs to the new reality irresistibly unfolding — and let us not forget that Germany has only had powerful
proletarian organisations for a decade! It therefore reflects the sentiments of the young generation of workers that has evolved over the last ten years. The old ideas still apply, of course, but to a decreasing extent; Kautsky’s conceptions express the primitive, immature moments in the organisation, still a force to be reckoned with, but an inhibiting, retarding one. It will be revealed by practice what relationship these different forces bear towards each other, in the decisions and acts by which the proletarian masses show what they deem themselves capable of.

4. The Conquest of Power

For a refutation of Kautsky’s extraordinary remarks on the role of the state and the conquest of political power and for discussion of his tendency to see anarchists everywhere, we must refer the reader to the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* of 10 September. Here we will add only a few comments to clarify our differences.

The question as to how the proletariat gains the fundamental democratic rights which, once its socialist class consciousness is sufficiently developed, endow it with political hegemony, is the basic issue underlying our tactics. We take the view that they can only be won from the ruling class in the course of engagements in which the latter’s whole might takes the field against the proletariat and in which, consequently, this whole might is overcome. Another conception would be that the ruling class surrenders these rights voluntarily under the influence of universal democratic or ethical ideals and without recourse to the means of coercion at its disposal — this would be the peaceful evolution towards the state of the future envisaged by the Revisionists. Kautsky rejects both these views: what possible alternative is there? We inferred from his statements that he conceived the conquest of power as the destruction of the enemy’s strength once and for all, a single act qualitatively different from all the proletariat’s previous activity in preparation for this revolution. Since Kautsky rejects this reading and since it is desirable that his basic conceptions regarding tactics should be clearly understood, we will proceed to quote the most important passages. In October 1910, he wrote:

“In a situation like that obtaining in Germany, I can only conceive a political general strike as a unique event in which the entire proletariat throughout the nation engages with all its might, as a life-and-death struggle, one in which our adversary is beaten down or else all our organisations, all our strength shattered or at least paralysed for years to come.”

It is to be supposed that by beating down our adversary, Kautsky means the conquest of political power; otherwise the unique act would have to be repeated a second or third time. Of course, the campaign might also prove insufficiently powerful, and in this case it would have failed, would have resulted in serious defeat, and would therefore have to be begun over again. But if it succeeded, the final goal would have been attained. Now, however, Kautsky is denying that he ever said that the mass strike could be an event capable of bringing down capitalism at a stroke. How, therefore, we are to take the above quotation I simply do not understand.

In 1911, Kautsky wrote in his article “Action by the masses” of the spontaneous actions of unorganised crowds:

“If the mass action succeeds, however, if it is so dynamic and so tremendously widespread, the masses so aroused and determined, the attack so sudden and the situation in which it catches our adversary so unfavourable to him that its effect is irresistible, then the masses will be able to exploit
this victory in a manner quite different from hitherto. [There follows the reference to the workers’ organisations.] Where these organisations have taken root, the times are past when the proletariat’s victories in spontaneous mass actions succeeded only in snatching the chestnuts from the fire for some particular section of its opponents which happened to be in opposition. Henceforth, it will be able to enjoy them itself.”

I can see no other possible interpretation of this passage than that as a result of a powerful spontaneous uprising on the part of the unorganised masses triggered off by some particularly provocative events, political power now falls into the hands of the proletariat itself, instead of into the hands of a bourgeois clique as hitherto. Here too the possibility is envisaged of assaults initially failing and collapsing in defeat before the attack finally succeeds. The protagonists in a political revolution of this kind and the methods they were using would put it completely outside the framework of the labour movement of today; while the latter was carrying on its routine activity of education and organisation, revolution would break over it without any warning “as if from another world” under the influence of momentous events. Thus, we can see no other interpretation that that put forward in our article. The crux of it is not that in this view revolution is a single sharp act; even if the conquest of power consisted of several such acts (mass strikes and “street” actions), the main point is the stark contrast between the current activity of the proletariat and the future revolutionary conquest of power, which belongs to a completely different order of things. Kautsky now explicitly confirms this:

“In order to avoid any misunderstanding, I should like to point out that my polemic with Comrade Luxemburg dealt with the political general strike and my article on ‘Action by the masses’ with street riots. I said of the latter that they could in certain circumstances lead to political upheavals, but were unpredicable by nature and could not be instigated at will. I was not referring to simple street demonstrations . . . .

I will repeat once again that my theory of ‘passive radicalism’, that is to say waiting for the appropriate occasion and mood among the masses, neither of which can be predicted in advance or hastened on by decision of the organisation, related only to street riots and mass strikes aimed at securing a particular political decision — and not to street demonstrations, nor to protest strikes. The latter can very well be called by party or trade union from time to time, irrespective of the mood of the masses outside the organisation, but do not necessarily involve new tactics so long as they remain mere demonstrations.”

We will not dwell on the fact that a political mass strike only permissible as a once-and-for-all event in 1910 and therefore ruled out of the contemporary Prussian suffrage campaign now suddenly appears among the day-to-day actions which can be initiated at the drop of a hat as a “protest strike”. We will merely point out that Kautsky is here making a sharp distinction between day-to-day actions, which are only demonstrations and can be called at will, and the unforeseeable revolutionary events of the future. New rights may occasionally be won in the day-to-day struggle; these are in no sense steps towards the conquest of power, otherwise the ruling class would put up resistance to them which could only be overcome by political strikes. Governments friendly to the workers may alternate with governments hostile to them, street demonstrations and mass strikes may play some part in the process, but for all that, nothing essential will change; our struggle remains “a political struggle against governments” restricting itself to “opposition” and leaving the
power of the state and its ministries intact. Until one day, when external events trigger off a massive popular uprising with street riots and political strikes that puts an end to this whole business.

It is only possible to maintain such a perspective by restricting one’s observation to external political forms and ignoring the political reality behind them. Analysis of the balance of power between the classes in conflict as one rises and the other declines is the only key to understanding revolutionary development. This transcends the sharp distinction between day-to-day action and revolution. The various forms of action mentioned by Kautsky are not polar opposites, but part of a gradually differentiated range, weak and powerful forms of action within the same category. Firstly, in terms of how they develop: even straightforward demonstrations cannot be called at will, but are only possible when strong feeling has been aroused by external causes, such as the rising cost of living and the danger of war today or the conditions of suffrage in Prussia in 1910. The stronger the feeling aroused, the more vigorously the protests can develop. What Kautsky has to say about the most powerful form of mass strike, namely that we should “give it the most energetic support and use it to strengthen the proletariat”, does not go far enough for cases where this situation has already generated a mass movement; when conditions permit, the party, as the conscious bearer of the exploited masses’ deepest sensibilities, must instigate such action as is necessary and take over leadership of the movement — in other words, play the same role in events of major significance as it does today on a smaller scale. The precipitating factors cannot be foreseen, but it is we who act upon them. Secondly, in terms of those taking part: we cannot restrict our present demonstrations solely to party members; although these at first form the nucleus, others will come to us in the course of the struggle. In our last article we showed that the circle of those involved grows as the campaign develops, until it takes in the broad masses of the people; there is never any question of unruly street riots in the old sense. Thirdly, in terms of the effects such action has: the conquest of power by means of the most potent forms of action basically amounts to liquidating the powers of coercion available to the enemy and building up our own strength; but even today’s protests, our simple street demonstrations, display this effect on a small scale. When the police had to abandon their attempts to prevent demonstrations in sheer impotence in 1910, that was a first sign of the state’s coercive powers beginning to crumble away; and the content of revolution consists in the total destruction of these powers. In this sense, that instance of mass action can be seen as the beginning of the German revolution.

The contrast between our respective views as set out here may at first sight appear to be purely theoretical; but it nevertheless has great practical significance with respect to the tactics we adopt. As Kautsky sees it, each time the opportunity for vigorous action arises we must stop and consider whether it might not lead to a “trial of strength”, an attempt to make the revolution, that is, by mobilising the entire strength of our adversary against us. And because it is accepted that we are too weak to undertake this, it will be only too easy to shrink from any action — this was the burden of the debate on the mass strike in Die Neue Zeit in 1910. Those who reject Kautsky’s dichotomy between day-to-day action and revolution, however, assess every action as an immediate issue, to be evaluated in terms of the prevailing conditions and the mood of the masses, and at the same time, as part of a great purpose. In each campaign one presses as far ahead as seems possible in the conditions obtaining, without allowing oneself to be hamstrung by specious theoretical considerations projected into the future; for the issue is never one of total revolution, nor of a
victory with significance only for the present, but always of a step further along the path of revolution.

5. Parliamentary Activity and Action by the Masses

Mass action is nothing new: it is as old as parliamentary activity itself. Every class that has made use of parliament has also on occasion resorted to mass action; for it forms a necessary complement or — better still — a corrective to parliamentary action. Since, in developed parliamentary systems, parliament itself enacts legislation, including electoral legislation, a class or clique which has once gained the upper hand is in a position to secure its rule for all time, irrespective of all social development. But if its hegemony becomes incompatible with a new stage of development, mass action, often in the form of a revolution or popular uprising, intervenes as a corrective influence, sweeps the ruling clique away, imposes a new electoral law on parliament, and thus reconciles parliament and society once again. Mass action can also occur when the masses are in particularly dire straits, to impel parliament to alleviate their misery. Fear of the consequences of the masses’ indignation often induces the class holding parliamentary power to make concessions which the masses would not otherwise have obtained. Whether or not the masses have spokesmen in parliament on such occasions is far from immaterial, but is nevertheless of secondary importance; the crucial determinant force lies outside.

We have now again entered a period when this corrective influence upon the working of parliament is more necessary than ever; the struggle for democratic suffrage on the one hand and the rising cost of living and the danger of war on the other are kindling mass action. Kautsky likes to point out that there is nothing new in these forms of struggle; he emphasises the similarity with earlier ones. We, however, stress the new elements which distinguish them from all that has gone before. The fact that the socialist proletariat of Germany has begun to use these methods endows them with entirely new significance and implications, and it was precisely to clarifying these that my article was devoted. Firstly, because the highly organised, class-conscious proletariat of which the German proletariat is the most developed example has a completely different class character from that of the popular masses hitherto, and its actions are therefore qualitatively different. Secondly, because this proletariat is destined to enact a far-reaching revolution, and the action which it takes will therefore have a profoundly subversive effect on the whole of society, on the power of the state and on the masses, even when it does not directly serve an electoral campaign.

Kautsky is therefore not justified in appealing to England as a model “in which we can best study the nature of modern mass action”. What we are concerned with is mass political action aimed at securing new rights and thus giving parliamentary expression to the power of the proletariat: in England it was a case of mass action by the trade unions, a massive strike in furtherance of trade-union demands, which expressed the weakness of the old conservative trade-union methods by seeking assistance from the government. What we are concerned with is a proletariat as politically mature, as deeply instilled with socialism as it is here in Germany; the socialist awareness and political clarity necessary for such actions were completely lacking among the masses on strike in England. Of course, the latter events also demonstrate that the labour movement cannot get by without mass action; they too are a consequence of imperialism. But despite the admirable solidarity and determination manifested in them, they had rather the character of desperate outbursts
than the deliberate actions leading to the conquest of power which only a proletariat deeply imbued with socialism can undertake.

As we pointed out in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, parliamentary activity and action by the masses are not incompatible with each other; mass action in the struggle for suffrage endows parliamentary activity with a new, broader basis. And in our first article we argued that the rising cost of living and the danger of war under imperialism, the modern form of capitalism, are at the root of modern mass action. Comrade Kautsky “fails to see” how this results in “the necessity for new tactics” — the necessity for mass action, in other words; for mass action aimed at “altering or exacting decisions by parliament” can no more do away with the basic effects of capitalism — the causes of the rise in the cost of living, for example, which lie in bad harvests, gold production and the cartel system — against which parliaments are powerless, than any other form of political action. It is a pity that the Parisians driven to revolt in 1848 by the crisis and the rising cost of living did not know that; they would certainly not have made the February Revolution. Perhaps Comrade Kautsky would see this as yet another demonstration of the incomprehension of the masses, whose instinct is deaf to the urgings of reason. But if, spurred on by hunger and misery, the masses rise up together and demand relief despite the theoretician’s arguments that no form of political action can achieve anything in the face of the fundamental evils of capitalism, then it is the masses’ instincts that are in the right and the theoretician’s science that is in the wrong. Firstly, because the action can set itself immediate goals that are not meaningless; when subjected to powerful pressure, governments and those in authority can do a great deal to alleviate misery, even when this has deeper causes and cannot be altered merely by parliamentary decision — as could duties and tariffs in Germany. Secondly, because the lasting effect of large-scale mass action is a more or less shattering blow to the hegemony of capital, and hence attacks the root of the evil.

Kautsky constantly proceeds upon the assumption that so long as capitalism has not been transformed into socialism, it must be accepted as a fixed, unchangeable fact against the effects of which it is pointless to struggle. During the period when the proletariat is still weak it is true that a particular manifestation of capitalism — such as war, the rising cost of living, unemployment -cannot be done away with so long as the rest of the system continues to function in all its power. But this is not true for the period of capitalist decline, in which the now mighty proletariat, itself an elemental force of capitalism, throws its own will and strength into the balance of elemental forces. If this view of the transition from capitalism to socialism seems “very obscure and mysterious” to Comrade Kautsky — which only means that it is new to him — then this is only because he regards capitalism and socialism as fixed, ready-made entities, and fails to grasp the transition from one to the other as a dialectical process. Each assault by the proletariat upon the individual effects of capitalism means a weakening of the power of capital, a strengthening of our own power and a step further in the process of revolution.

6. Marxism and the Role of the Party

In conclusion, a few more words on theory. These are necessary because Kautsky hints from time to time that our work takes leave of the materialist conception of history, the basis of Marxism. In one place he describes our conception of the nature of organisation as spiritualism ill befitting a materialist. On another occasion he takes our view that the proletariat must develop its power and
freedom “in constant attack and advance”, in a class struggle escalating from one engagement to another, to mean that the party executive is to “instigate” the revolution.

Marxism explains all the historical and political actions of men in terms of their material relations, and in particular their economic relations. A recurrent bourgeois misconception accuses us of ignoring the role of the human mind in this, and making man a dead instrument, a puppet of economic forces. We insist in turn that Marxism does not eliminate the mind. Everything which motivates the actions of men does so through the mind. Their actions are determined by their will, and by all the ideals, principles and motives that exist in the mind. But Marxism maintains that the content of the human mind is nothing other than a product of the material world in which man lives, and that economic relations therefore only determine his actions by their effects upon his mind and influence upon his will. Social revolution only succeeds the development of capitalism because the economic upheaval first transforms the mind of the proletariat, endowing it with a new content and directing the will in this sense. Just as Social-Democratic activity is the expression of a new perspective and new determination instilling themselves in the mind of the proletariat, so organisation is an expression and consequence of a profound mental transformation in the proletariat. This mental transformation is the term of mediation by which economic development leads to the act of social revolution. There can surely be no disagreement between Kautsky and ourselves that this is the role which Marxism attributes to the mind.

And yet even in this connection our views differ; not in the sphere of abstract, theoretical formulation, but in our practical emphasis. It is only when taken together that the two statements “The actions of men are entirely determined by their material relations” and “Men must make their history themselves through their own actions” constitute the Marxist view as a whole. The first rules out the arbitrary notion that a revolution can be made at will; the second eliminates the fatalism that would have us simply wait until the revolution happens of its own accord through some perfect fruition of development. While both maxims are correct in theoretical terms, they necessarily receive different degrees of emphasis in the course of historical development. When the party is first flourishing and must before all else organise the proletariat, seeing its own development as the primary aim of its activity, the truth embodied in the first maxim gives it the patience for the slow process of construction, the sense that the time of premature putsches is past and the calm certainty of eventual victory. Marxism takes on a predominantly historico-economic character in this period; it is the theory that all history is economically determined, and drums into us the realisation that we must wait for conditions to mature. But the more the proletariat organises itself into a mass movement capable of forceful intervention in social life, the more it is bound to develop a sense of the second maxim. The awareness now grows that the point is not simply to interpret the world, but to change it. Marxism now becomes the theory of proletarian action. The questions of how precisely the proletariat’s spirit and will develop under the influence of social conditions and how the various influences shape it now come into the foreground; interest in the philosophical side of Marxism and in the nature of the mind now comes to life. Two Marxists influenced by these different stages will therefore express themselves differently, the one primarily emphasising the determinate nature of the mind, the other its active role; they will both lead their respective truths into battle against each other, although they both pay homage to the same Marxian theory.
From the practical point of view, however, this disagreement takes on another light. We entirely agree with Kautsky that an individual or group cannot make the revolution. Equally, Kautsky will agree with us that the proletariat must make the revolution. But how do matters stand with the party, which is a middle term, on the one hand a large group which consciously decides what action it will take, and on the other the representative and leader of the entire proletariat? What is the function of the party?

With respect to revolution, Kautsky puts it as follows in his exposition of his tactics: “Utilisation of the political general strike, but only in occasional, extreme instances when the masses can no longer be restrained.” Thus, the party is to hold back the masses for as long as they can be held back; so long as it is in any way possible, it should regard its function as to keep the masses placid, to restrain them from taking action; only when this is no longer possible, when popular indignation is threatening to burst all constraint, does it open the flood-gates and if possible put itself at the head of the masses. The roles are thus distributed in such a way that all the energy, all the initiative in which revolution has its origins must come from the masses, while the party’s function is to hold this activity back, inhibit it, contain it for as long as possible. But the relationship cannot be conceived in this way. Certainly, all the energy comes from the masses, whose revolutionary potential is aroused by oppression, misery and anarchy, and who by their revolt must then abolish the hegemony of capital. But the party has taught them that desperate outbursts on the part of individuals or individual groups are pointless, and that success can only be achieved through collective, united, organised action. It has disciplined the masses and restrained them from frittering away their revolutionary activity fruitlessly. But this, of course, is only the one, negative side of the party’s function; it must simultaneously show in positive terms how these energies can be set to work in a different, productive manner, and lead the way in doing so. The masses have, so to speak, made over part of their energy, their revolutionary purpose, to the organised collectivity, not so that it shall be dissipated, but so that the party can put it to use as their collective will. The initiative and potential for spontaneous action which the masses surrender by doing so is not in fact lost, but re-appears elsewhere and in another form as the party’s initiative and potential for spontaneous action; a transformation of energy takes place, as it were. Even when the fiercest indignation flares up among the masses — over the rising cost of living, for example — they remain calm, for they rely upon the party calling upon them to act in such a way that their energy will be utilised in the most appropriate and most successful manner possible.

The relationship between masses and party cannot therefore be as Kautsky has presented it. If the party saw its function as restraining the masses from action for as long as it could do so, then party discipline would mean a loss to the masses of their initiative and potential for spontaneous action, a real loss, and not a transformation of energy. The existence of the party would then reduce the revolutionary capacity of the proletariat rather than increase it. It cannot simply sit down and wait until the masses rise up spontaneously in spite of having entrusted it with part of their autonomy; the discipline and confidence in the party leadership which keep the masses calm place it under an obligation to intervene actively and itself give the masses the call for action at the right moment. Thus, as we have already argued, the party actually has a duty to instigate revolutionary action, because it is the bearer of an important part of the masses’ capacity for action; but it cannot do so as and when it pleases, for it has not assimilated the entire will of the entire proletariat, and cannot therefore order it about like a troop of soldiers. It must wait for the right moment: not until the
masses will wait no longer and are rising up of their own accord, but until the conditions arouse such feeling in the masses that large-scale action by the masses has a chance of success. This is the way in which the Marxist doctrine is realised that although men are determined and impelled by economic development, they make their own history. The revolutionary potential of the indignation aroused in the masses by the intolerable nature of capitalism must not go untapped and hence be lost; nor must it be frittered away in unorganised outbursts, but made fit for organised use in action instigated by the party with the objective of weakening the hegemony of capital. It is in these revolutionary tactics that Marxist theory will become reality.