

How the Budapest Central Workers' Council was set up

by Balazs Nagy



Living History Library

Published by Living History Library,
28 Canning Street,
Liverpool L8 7NP
October 2006

ISBN 0-9542077-2-6

Printed by Stewart Press
748 Barking Road,
Plaistow,
London E13 9PJ

*Dedicated to the memory of Sándor
Bali, son and outstanding leader of the
Hungarian working class, true guide of
the Greater Budapest Central
Workers' Council in 1956*

Contents

Preface.....	5
Forerunners of the Central Workers' Council and the conditions under which it was set up.....	7
Efforts to organise the workers' struggle.....	17
First steps towards setting up the Central Workers' Council.....	25
Setting up the Central Workers' Council.....	29
Shaping the policies and tactics of the Central Council.....	42



Preface to the English Edition

THIS pamphlet was published thirty five years ago in French, first in Brussels and then in Paris. Its purpose was to examine the Hungarian revolution to try and establish what it was and what it meant by looking at one of its most important events.

This tremendous uprising broke through the scope of all ordinary – and therefore conformist – ways of thinking, whether simply bourgeois or petty bourgeois-Stalinist. It was both perturbing and disturbing to the spirits, particularly since the revolutionaries themselves had a whole lot of contradictory ideas and confused feelings about their own actions. For Stalinists in Moscow and around the world, of course, it was a counter-revolution provoked and led by fascist groups followed by some irresponsible and demoralised elements. Needless to say, in this they essentially agreed with the world bourgeoisie, who welcomed the revolution as a massive move towards capitalist restoration. Although the bourgeois press never described it as fascist, it is striking how much they agree with the Stalinists in seeing the events as capitalist restoration.

A great number of the participants saw it only as a vast national war of independence against Kremlin oppression. Others, in seeking its inner character, described it as a rebellion of intellectuals; some even went so far as to speak of a revolt of the spirit. Even if they rejected some of the capitalist explanations, a considerable number of people thought it had all of the above-mentioned qualities. The confusion was total.

It was therefore necessary to carry out an examination of this disturbing event. That was the purpose of the present text, almost five years after the revolution, when the author was able to overcome his own confusion and, armed with an adequate collection of material sources, undertake an objective analysis which went beyond passions and emotions.

The result of his investigation, supported by all the documents, completely confirmed his previous feelings and appraisals: the Hungarian revolution was a movement of the whole people, led by the working class, desiring, on the basis of all previous conquests, to establish its own socialism freed of bureaucracy. This was a necessary clarification which entirely corroborated Leon Trotsky's analysis of the political revolution carried out some thirty years before the event. It was also an important stage in the author's own theoretical and political evolution from his agitated and confused political thinking towards the programme and organisation of the Fourth International.

Despite such a historical verification, the present total collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracy did not follow the path of the Hungarian revolution. The counter-revolutionary pact between the bureaucracy and the pro-capitalist elements in those countries, backed by imperialism and combined with a lack of genuine workers' organisations, prevented the working class from playing its own independent role and taking the lead. Thus from the beginning the revolution was socially and politically misappropriated by the disintegrating

bureaucracy allied to and directly becoming the pro-capitalist forces.

Nevertheless, the principal lessons of the Hungarian revolution indicate a positive way out of the capitalist crisis, whether in the 'old' rich and poor countries it ravages or those nascent capitalist ones. That is above all that there is a true and progressive way out which rejects the false alternatives of capitalism or Stalinism, which even today still seems to hold back and paralyse the revolutionary actions of working people. The independent action of the working class itself, the self-organisation of working people into their own councils or committees which tend towards and in fact seize power is precisely such a way out. The Hungarian revolution constituted an important step forward on the long road opened up by the Paris Commune, then the October Revolution and tried out and enriched by so many people in history. Despite its weaknesses, it tested, verified and confirmed Marx's famous but so often neglected or forgotten words: 'The emancipation of the working class can only be achieved by the working class itself.'

October 1996

Balazs Nagy

Editor's note to the 2006 edition

As the date on the above Preface indicates, it had originally been the intention to publish this translation in commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution. However, for various reasons that proved impossible. The present edition of the pamphlet has been brought out to co-incide with the 50th anniversary of the events described. As far as I know, it is the only complete English translation of the text.

September 2006

Bob Archer

Forerunners of the Central Workers' Council and the conditions under which it was set up

The brutal intervention of the Soviet army on 4 November 1956 did not end the Hungarian revolution. Its most authentic organ, the Central Workers' Council, was only born ten days later.

Attempts to co-ordinate the activities of the councils before 4 November

Although the Central Council only came into being after 4 November, there had already been similar initiatives by workers during the initial victory of the revolution. They were more clearly evident in the provinces, where in several instances the workers' council directed the political, economic and administrative life of a whole industrial region. The absence of any administration, or rather of any central power, made it easier for the councils to take over the leadership of a region and thus to create their own power. But even in Budapest, where the government of Imre Nagy did express popular demands, workers tried to organise independently of the administration or of political organisations. Thus some factory representatives occasionally formed district-wide workers' councils, inspired and led by the councils in the big factories. In the working-class suburbs like Ujpest and Csepel the workers' council represented the whole district.

Although I do not intend on this occasion to deal with the activities of the councils during the armed revolution, I do think it must be emphasised that before 4 November, and even in Budapest, these councils did try to organise together and to set up their own organisation.

I emphasise this phenomenon because I wish to counter a widely-held view that the Central Workers' Council was organised and brought into being merely in response to, and as the only possible form of resistance to, the Soviet intervention. Even before that attack the workers of Budapest had already started spontaneously to organise their actions and therefore to set up an organisation that had a territorial basis. To forget this is to reduce the revolution to a political or governmental combination, or to see it simply as an anti-Soviet action, and thus in the last analysis as something negative. It is indeed odd that the already quite extensive literature on the Hungarian revolution hardly even

How the Budapest Central Workers' Council was set up

hints at these activities on the part of the councils.

On the basis of documentary evidence we can say that over and above their factory councils, the workers of Budapest organised at a much higher, capital-wide, level.

On 31 October 1956, for example, there was a meeting of workers attended by representatives of 24 big firms including the Ganz wagon works, the Ganz shipyard, the Ganz electrical works, the Mávag and the Láng engineering works and the Beloianis and the Egyesült Izzó electrical appliance works¹

This meeting adopted a resolution summing up the 'principles governing the rights and activities of workers' councils' in nine points.

Point 1 declares that 'the factory belongs to the workers' and point 2 establishes that 'the supreme body directing the factory is the workers' council democratically elected by the workers'.

It should be noted that points 5, 6 and 7 define the rights of the workers' council, which consist in:

- a) approving and ratifying the firm's plans,
- b) deciding on what basis wages will be fixed and set,
- c) approving all export contracts,
- d) approving the conduct of all credit operations,
- e) settling disputes over hiring and firing of all company employees,
- f) appointing the firm's manager, who is responsible to the workers' council²

Thus there is no doubt that during the revolution workers took up issues not merely at a factory but also at a district level, uniting their demands and their forces in the organisational sphere.

In this context one could also mention the meeting of 31 October of representatives of the workers' councils of factories in the 11th district, attended by representatives from more than twelve big firms who adopted a joint resolution³.

On the afternoon of 1 November, Radio Kossuth announced that an important meeting between representatives of the big factories, the intellectuals, the students and the government had taken place during the morning. This meeting decided to call together representatives of the councils in the big factories that same evening⁴.

According to the first issue of *Népszabadság*, representatives of the Csepel factories, Mávag, Ganz, Láng and a dozen other big firms attended. They decided to call for a return to work because they were convinced that the revolution had triumphed and they had confidence in the Nagy government.

This resolution said nothing about the one quoted above and omitted references to the rights of workers' councils. Nevertheless, the meeting proved that the government had to negotiate with the workers to resolve as vital a question for the consolidation of the revolutionary regime as the resumption of work. In doing so they completely ignored not only the 'pre-eminently proletarian' parties but also the trade unions, and appealed directly to the

workers themselves, i.e. the councils. Consequently the formation of a working-class body at a higher level did not merely translate the spontaneous wishes of workers, but was also a necessary condition for the consolidation of the revolution. Thus the formation of a central workers' council lay fair and square in the nature of events, even before 4 November. The workers' councils started to go beyond the bounds of the factory and co-ordinated their programmes. It was only a small step from this to the birth of a central council.

It could not have been any other way. The councils were the product of workers' own experience and their spontaneous wishes. They came to recognise the need to join together, first in districts and then at a higher level. It dawned on them that their influence grew the more their organised strength lent it weight. We should not forget that it was the workers themselves, without any organisation, party, group, trade union or whatever, who as it were re-learned the experiences of the whole history of the workers' movement, enriching it as they did so. That is why, lacking 'reliable' theoreticians, they organised their strength gradually. There was one other important factor in their relative slowness to organise the central council: the Nagy government adopted the people's demands as its own and the person of Imre Nagy was seen as a guarantee that they would be carried out. There was thus an alliance between the workers and the central government which acted as a brake upon the formation of a separate workers' power.

The central government, powerfully assisted, influenced and encouraged by the workers and the whole population, seemed to have achieved its objectives and the revolution appeared to triumph. One after the other, the workers' councils called for a return to work by 5 November. Their main concerns were the economic and administrative problems of the factories, which they regarded as their own property, and the role they would play in the new society born of the revolution.

Soviet Intervention and General Strike

The concentrated surprise attack by the Soviet army at dawn on 4 November transformed the situation. Although it held out until 10 - 12 November, especially in working-class districts, the armed resistance which was quickly set on foot could not withstand it in the long run.

In the provinces, the struggle was fiercest in the industrial and working-class areas. In the Sztalinváros steel-making centre, newly built in the course of the first five-year plan, the workers rejected the Soviet commander's call to surrender on 7 November. The general assault which followed this rejection did not break the workers' desperate resistance until three days later. In the north, resistance continued in the Borsod region, the undisputed centre of the Hungarian metallurgical industry, and the Tatabánya and Dorog coalfields. In the south, the armed struggle did not stop until the very last minute in the industrial city of Pécs and the coalfield in the surrounding hills. In the capital

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

the armed struggle continued until 11 November in Csepel, the traditional bastion of the workers' movement.

Reading the official statistics about damage to buildings caused by the fighting, one is struck by the fact that most of the buildings damaged are in the 8th, 9th, 20th and 21st districts, which are the equivalent of the 13th and 15th *arrondissements* in Paris, Ivry and Billancourt, and not the fashionable 12th district, Hungary's equivalent to the 16th *arrondissements* in Paris. Another set of published statistics speaks volumes in a few dry figures: 'The largest number of fatalities as a result of the armed conflict arose in the 8th (22 %), 9th (14 %) and 7th (13 %) districts'⁵. These are the typical working-class districts of Budapest. Finally, I shall quote the indirect evidence of one author who writes: 'according to statistics provided by some hospitals, between 80 % and 90 % of the wounded fighters were young workers: students only represented between 3 % and 5 % of the wounded'⁶.

It stands out clearly that the workers were the backbone of the Hungarian revolution; it was they who fought for its aims and spilled the most blood to defend it. To establish this historical fact is not in any way to minimise the part played by the intellectuals and students. But it has to be laid down once and for all unequivocally that in its essence the Hungarian revolution was identical with the workers' struggle.

The nature of the change on 4 November was obvious to the workers. Just as they were determined to return to work on 5 November, so, after the Soviet attack, it was completely natural for them to strike. Indeed, it was a more significant weapon than the armed struggle, which was hopeless from the start.

Never has a strike been as complete and general as that called by Hungarian workers following the Soviet invasion. White-collar workers and the staff of every public institution, the schools and the universities joined it. Of course, official statistics try to hide the extent of the strike. They often descend to crude camouflage to deny the facts. Reading these publications one senses very clearly that they are trying to look at the facts only in the more favourable light of the return to work in December and January. The newspapers, on the other hand, were unable to hide the facts, which were too obvious at the time. *Népszabadság* for example, wrote towards the end of *January* that coal production stood at 40,000 tonnes, less than half the normal production. And that was in January 1957!

The workers rose up against Soviet intervention and the Kádár government. They sought to use the general strike to impose their demands and have their wishes respected. Consequently the consolidation of the Kádár regime was closely bound up with the return to work. Hence the endless and tireless campaign for a return to work by the press and the radio and in the speeches of government ministers. The best way to grasp the enormous extent of the strike is therefore to follow the considerable but vain efforts and attempts of the Kádár team to get the workers back to work.

In his statement broadcast on 4 November, Kádár appealed to the workers to 'return to work without delay'. The workers laughed at him. Kádár repeated

his warnings on 6 and 7 November: he 'hoped for', he asked for a return to work. Then he changed tone and threatened the workers, then he begged them again. In vain his comrade Marosán stated on the radio on 8 November: 'Every honest worker must return to work'. The workers did not budge. They put forward their demands and the strike remained general. Of course, they went in to the factories to pick up their wages, and then the strike went on. On 13 November the government decreed that it was forbidden to pay workers who would not go back to work⁷.

This is not the place for a complete history of the strike. To round off these few lines which, short as they are, nevertheless give a snapshot of the situation, I should like to quote a few reflections from abroad published in one Paris newspaper. From 6 November onwards *L'Humanité* endlessly repeated that 'work has been resumed' and 'the situation is back to normal', thus denying each morning what it had said the day before. As if that were not enough, it said on 12 November that: 'with the support of the workers, the Kádár government is getting the country back on course'. But the same day, *Libération* quoted the following summary in the Yugoslav newspaper *Politika*: 'The Hungarian masses are restless . . . Nagy did not succeed; Kádár's task is considerably more difficult'⁸.

Workers' Councils against the Kádár government

I said that the workers advanced their own demands. What were they?

These demands were the same as those of the revolution. The Hungarian people, and the workers in particular, wanted to change the Stalinist regime into true socialism. In doing so they found that they faced a system established by the Communist Party and at the same time its foreign prop, the Soviet Union. Consequently the revolutionary struggle was inevitably intertwined with the struggle for national independence. The repression, too, combined the soviet attack with the installation of the Kádár regime in power. In the light of this fundamental character of the Hungarian revolution, simple as it is, one can only marvel at the so-called profundity of those who claim it was possible to reconcile the revolution with military intervention. Would it have been possible to reconcile the Paris Commune with Bismarck or Thiers? Although the two situations were very different, the essential facts remain the same.

Hungarian workers could do no other than demand the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the return to power of Imre Nagy, which in their eyes was the only guarantee that their revolutionary objectives would be carried out. A general strike was not enough to achieve this. The government knew only too well that its power depended on more than Soviet bayonets and that the workers held the key to political consolidation, on the one hand in the general strike and on the other in the workers' councils. As the *Manchester Guardian* put it so well: 'The general strike through which this fight is now being carried on is a murderous weapon both for those who use it and those against whom it is directed. For the Kádár government, supported only by Soviet tanks, is being

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

killed as effectively as if each of its members were strung up from a lamp-post⁹

So the strike was a 'murderous weapon' and political consolidation became the principal concern of the Kádár government and the workers alike. With this aim, Kádár tried from 4 November onwards to win the confidence of the revolutionary people. In his programme, broadcast on 4 November, the 9th and 11th points are in effect revolutionary:

Point 9: 'On the basis of the broadest democracy, workers' control to be introduced in the factories and workplaces.'

Point 11: 'To guarantee democratic elections to all existing administrative bodies and to the *revolutionary* councils'¹⁰.

While the government made cautious overtures to the workers, the latter quickly realised that an unorganised strike would be no use at all. Basing themselves on this government call, the workers' councils in the factories resumed activity and became the real organisers of the struggle, especially since, as one member of the Central Workers Council was to write later, the workers 'sensed that the country had no master'.

These directly-elected workers' councils represented the workers and the factories and formulated the workers' demands. Their authority rested on the idea that arose when they were set up right at the beginning of the revolution when: '... the thought occurred suddenly that if such workers' councils could be set up in Yugoslavia and take over ownership of the factories, we could do that too'¹¹. Thus the councils regarded themselves as owners of the factories and rejected any central authority whatever. Politically they organised the strike and opposed the central government.

But they knew that the strike on its own was not an adequate guarantee of success. Lacking an authority they trusted, such as the Nagy government, they relied upon themselves. The form of organisation for the required consolidation thus became quite naturally the council. The task then was to organise and strengthen it. The councils put forward their revolutionary demands, one of which deserves particular attention: On 10 November a delegation from the Ganz electrical factory, one of the biggest in Budapest, met Kádár to discuss their demand for the workers to be armed. The leader of the delegation himself gave the following report on the discussion at a later meeting with the government:

'A fortnight ago we conducted fairly thorough discussions with the Government on this matter... We were given the assurance that the demands of the workers would be met' (about linking workers to the security services - BN) 'Up to the present, no steps have been taken in this matter... Another demand of the same nature was that units of armed guards must be organised for the factories, because it is not only the government which wants guarantees from the working-class to the effect that it will not allow the return of Fascism to Hungary; The working class, too, wants guarantees that, through it being armed, no other force will be able to pervert the original and true aims of

revolution and abolish the successes that it has so far attained'.¹²

Nothing could have terrified this government more than the arming of the working class. The councils were a growing inconvenience, not to say a danger. Even if it did intend to set up a system of councils in the factories, as it promised daily from 4 November onwards, it had to see that these councils, with their working-class ideas about collective ownership, armed workers' guards and workers' autonomy in general, made the Kádár government and the Soviet presence impossible. No: Kádár and his companions had to confront the councils and definitively install their own regime.

Their real intentions became clear during talks with the delegation from the World Federation of Trade Unions from 23-27 November 1956. In this delegation's report, Louis Saillant and his two companions published the Kádár government's version of how the workers' councils came into being. It goes like this: 'The problem is that they (the councils - author's note) were set up under the conditions of the counter-revolution, at a time of nationalism and demagogy, when the representative organisations *could not play the leading role*'¹³. 'These councils', Kádár and Marosán went on, 'put out demagogic slogans with a "working-class" coloration, calling for the setting-up of autonomous central councils, for example. The government does not agree with these. It is at present very difficult to put an end to this period of anarchic strikes, which do nothing to enhance the political and moral prestige of the working class which resorts to them. In certain firms the workers share out everything they produce between themselves on the advice of people who have an interest in ruining the country economically'¹⁴.

These statements sum up so accurately the situation at the time and the attitude of the Kádár government that we should spend a little time on them.

So what we have here is something calling itself a 'revolutionary government of workers and peasants' which not only does not represent workers but which opposes workers' initiatives just like any capitalist, and a backward one at that. Kádár's explanation, moreover, clearly shows the character of his centralist and bureaucratic spirit in the face of the truly democratic and revolutionary ideas of the workers. Obviously the workers' councils became the government's main enemy because they wanted 'autonomous central councils'.

The workers' councils saw all too clearly that when all was said and done their power was only potential, since their influence on the situation was informal, unorganised and solely due to their presence and mass strength. The actions of the individual councils were disorganised and there was a lack of collaboration between them, of collective decision-making. To overcome this lack, certain councils, even in early November, formed district-wide councils. We know that such councils were formed in the 11th, 13th and 14th districts, in Újpest and Csepel. These councils were set up by delegates from the councils in the district and almost their only function was to coordinate the activities and demands of the factories.

The government had to act. On 12 November it decreed that the

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

revolutionary councils could only act as consultative bodies, they could no longer directly run things. At the same time the government decided to appoint 'government liaison officers' to the regional councils 'to assist in carrying out government decrees'. It formed various kinds of government commission.¹⁵

Their intentions were clear. Faced with the dangers of the strike and the intensification of the councils' activities, the government had decided to go on to the counter-offensive. To combat the revolution's clear tendency to decentralise power, it reinforced the central power. Its decisions, decrees and orders bear the stamp of a resolutely centralist and bureaucratic spirit, pushing back workers' rights and autonomy, concentrating the administration in the hands of the central government, imposing functionaries appointed from above against the elected representatives of the people. Leaving aside for a moment the political colouration of the two sides, a careful and objective study of the decisions of the Kádár government shows that its main, if not only, concern was to destroy the autonomy of the workers and the people and to reorganise the central power as quickly as possible in all its centralised majesty and omnipotence.

But it had to break the growing power of the workers' councils. Following the decree on revolutionary committees, a government decision on workers' councils appeared on 13 November. It stated that workers' councils had the right to take decisions about the firm's affairs which the manager had to carry out *as long as they did not contradict laws and decrees currently in force*. (It should not be overlooked that at that time almost all the laws and decrees promulgated since 1950 were in force. Consequently this decision contradicted itself). The decision stipulated that the councils had the right to express their opinion on wages problems and to determine how a part of the factory's profits should be distributed. Finally it stated that the workers should re-elect their councils within the following three weeks.

The government tried to confine the councils' activities to purely economic problems, thus keeping them out of the political sphere. Even within the economic sphere, it thumbed its nose at workers by saying that the councils had to remain within the framework of existing legislation. What is more, this decree imposed the government upon the workers as a body with the right to prescribe what they could and could not do. This is particularly clear where the decree gives us to understand that the councils are factory bodies and that the idea of building district-wide or even central councils was absurd and that consequently there was only one national or central body, the government.

The workers and the Soviet army

And yet this government functioned on paper only! Its members and its very few employees only ventured onto the streets with Soviet tanks and an armed escort. They were above all as scared of going to the factories as the devil is of entering a church.

The Kádár government could do practically nothing. The people boycotted it as the civil accessory of an oppressing army. There was absolutely no administration. Its decrees and decisions appeared and nobody carried them out. Thus, from the first day of the intervention, Kádár and his team rested on the Soviet army not only politically and militarily but also administratively. It was the organisation of the Soviet army which served as a government administration. It was Guards Major-General Grebennik, Soviet commandant of Budapest, who organised the life of the capital. For example, he ordered the shops to open and regulated their opening hours, as well as the movement of the population.¹⁶

In order to put the Kádár government in power, the Soviet command was forced to take the initiative in reorganising the life of the country, using military means, of course. The same order of 6 November says in Point 3:

‘We appeal to the manual and clerical workers in the factories, shops, and transport services, to all municipal and commercial employees to return to work. All those who hinder their return to work by whatever means will be dealt with.’¹⁷

From these brief and decisive military words the workers understood that they were confronted by the Soviet army not only in the national struggle bound up with the revolutionary cause, but also directly and tangibly in their daily lives as revolutionary workers.

Grebennik was the kind of soldier who kept his word. As a general rule armies do not mess about, especially when they are surrounded by a hostile and combative working class. That is why this one started by spreading terror.

Soviet military lorries started to arrest lone pedestrians in the capital. Rumours circulated that the growing number of people arrested in this way were being deported to the Soviet Union. In fact they were. A fear of mass or accidental deportation seized the masses. The government had to intervene and admit indirectly that such actions had been carried out. Of course I cannot quote here the large number of facts which show that this operation was carried out by the Soviet army, but here are a few:

‘Rumours are rife’ (says *Napló* [‘The News’], a Debrecen newspaper) ‘that Hungarian prisoners are being transported to the Soviet Union in closed wagons through Debrecen via Záhony’ (the frontier-post between Hungary and the Soviet Union). ‘In this connection, official sources have stated that such cases will not be repeated and that all the necessary steps are being taken to get the rolling-stock returned.’¹⁸

The workers were faced not only by a government organising its own, anti-working class power, but above all by the whole Soviet army. Their weapon, the strike, became the form of opposition to this army too, as it more and more concerned itself with getting a return to work using police methods.

Confrontations, even skirmishes between workers and Soviet army units

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

became daily events. For that reason on 8 November Grebennik invited the leaders of the workers' councils in the 11th district to talks. In a tense atmosphere the workers declared that they would only return to work after their demands were accepted. Grebennik rejected this brutally and categorically, saying that they were unacceptable. He called the workers present fascists and agents of imperialism and threatened to arrest them. There was also another meeting between Grebennik and a delegation of Csepel workers where he took the same tone.¹⁹

The workers understood that they would have to act to defend the revolution and their own demands, not only through the general strike but by developing forms and means of struggle to make it more effective.

Efforts to Organise the Workers' Struggle

The Soviet army and the Kádár government were thus engaged in counter-revolutionary activity. The organisations which had arisen out of the revolution ceased activity at the same time as did the Nagy government and the political parties. Those which remained active, such as the Students' Revolutionary Committee and the Revolutionary Council of Intellectuals, were reduced to semi-illegality. In any case, these were not organisations of the masses. There were others that were legal, but they were so small they were unable to wage a political struggle of any scope. Discontent was general and people wanted a solution that would preserve the gains of the revolution. In this tense atmosphere the people's hostility to the counter-revolutionary forces had to find expression. The workers could not see any actually existing political force that could defend their interests and those of the revolution.

Attempts by the working class

Under these circumstances the workers themselves represented that force. Now the workers' councils entered the political arena, and even constituted it. This demanded a more and more developed organisation on their part, especially since they themselves incessantly put forward demands and protests backed by the weapon of the general strike. Politically speaking, the councils signified a potential power, while the actual power of the Soviet army was a foreign body in the country and in no way reflected the true relationship of political forces.

But the power of the workers' councils was only potential, and to make it actual it had to be organised. Workers were not slow to realise this.

From 8 November onwards the life of Budapest, and especially the 11th and 13th districts, Ujpest and Csepel, was marked by exuberant activity on the part of the councils.

On 12 November delegates from the workers' councils of the 11th district met together and worked out their common demands in eight points. It was the first time since 4 November that the councils of a wider area had organised and held a meeting where - and this is the essential point - they worked out common demands. Moreover, these demands were not content merely to repeat known problems. In a sense it was a real programme, and in studying it one can trace in some detail the kind of society these workers wanted to build. It is therefore important to look at this document more closely.

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

'We emphasise', the delegates say in Point 1, 'that the revolutionary working class considers the factories and the land to be the property of the toilers'.

This leaves absolutely no room for doubt. The workers and their councils did not want to give the factories back either to their former owners or to the Stalinist or in general communist bureaucrats. In the face of this unequivocal affirmation the central government cannot but appear counter-revolutionary.

But Point 3 was no less important. This demanded that the scope of the workers' councils' economic, social and cultural activities should be extended and guaranteed. Thus the workers' councils were not content with the limited rights granted them - on paper only - by the government programme. They advanced a demand which at that time threatened a central administration which itself was barely established: a 'workers' administration', a particular kind of self-determination, or, at least, broad working-class autonomy over against the state.

Point 4 demanded free elections 'in which', the resolution specified, 'all those parties may participate which recognise or have recognised the socialist conquests on the basis of collective ownership of the means of production'.

Point 7 emphasised forcibly that 'the country's armed forces must be organised from among factory workers and army troops loyal to the people'.

As concerns the political consolidation of the country, the resolution summed up the workers' demands in three points. It declared that the workers recognised the Kádár government on condition it changed in line with the people's wishes. The workers demanded the release of Imre Nagy and the imprisoned revolutionaries and an immediate cease-fire and withdrawal on the part of Soviet troops²⁰.

This extremely important resolution enables us to visualise what the Hungarian workers' objectives were, especially as we shall find almost the same intentions and aspirations later in the activity of the Central Workers' Council and the workers' councils in general.

Collective ownership of the factories in the hands of workers, mediated by workers' councils as the only genuine managers; based on this council system, an extension of their power into the economic, social and cultural sphere; similarly, the organisation of the armed forces along militia lines; in the political sphere, a system of several socialist parties.

Of course, this is a sketch rather than a real plan for social re-organisation. In practice, several problems would have arisen over the administrative form given to collective ownership, the relationship between the councils and the political parties, and so forth. But those who drew up this programme on 12 November 1956 in the 11th district of Budapest were workers, not theoreticians. Their main concern was to put together a common demand, they were engaged in a day-to-day struggle in which theory played almost no part. It was their spontaneous intentions, their working-class instincts and, in a way, their political 'education' in a people's democracy which, taken together, enabled this demand to express the profoundest aims of the Hungarian working class.

The most important thing at that moment was to combat the disastrous conditions in the life of the country and as far as possible force the Kádár government and the Soviet army to bend to the workers. While we are on this subject, the fact that the meeting was held is very important, since it showed working-class organisation on a level higher than that of the factory. The very day that the government decree limiting the councils' activities to the factories and the economic sphere went to press, the workers of the 11th district extended their activities towards a broader working-class union. It was no accident that these workers, in the text of the resolution, called this meeting a 'workers' parliament', showing that a centre other than the government, and not centralised, was arising on behalf of the workers.

And very emphatically the meeting decide not to consider a return to work until their demands had been recognised and guaranteed.

The following day, when the government decree was published, a delegation of workers went to parliament for talks with Kádár. According to the documents, this delegation came from the 13th district, but other factories also took part, including the Ganz-Mávag complex and the town of Baja²¹.

Here and there, workers recognised the need to rally their forces and organised meetings of factory council representatives. By the force of circumstances these meetings quickly gave birth to the Central Workers' Council.

What the intellectuals were doing

But the workers were not the only ones concerned to defend the revolution, and therefore oppose Soviet intervention and the Kádár government. The whole population opposed this situation. Leaving the other revolutionary forces aside for a moment, I must examine what the intellectuals did, which was not only of major importance in relation to the overall situation, but also contributed very largely to the formation of the Central Workers' Council.

Of course, in this I am not concerned with describing their organisations and actions as such. The only matter of interest here is how they related to the formation of the Central Workers' Council. Given that we are dealing with intellectuals here, a few introductory remarks are necessary.

I have said that the workers' councils represented the only political force needed, and that the others were not mass organisations, or were at least not sufficiently strong. Having said that, it should be remembered that the councils' political activity drew in and represented the working masses and behind them the whole population. While also continuing their political activity, the organisations of intellectuals put the emphasis on the search for a political and theoretical formula, a programme that could solve the political problem raised by the intervention of 4 November. To *simplify*, one could say that the workers waged the struggle and the intelligentsia, while helping them in practice, sought for its part to formulate the basis and objectives of the struggle.

The military victory of the intervention meant that the political demands of

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

the revolution had to be modified, as well as its tactics and methods. The intransigent programme of before 4 November became as unrealisable as the political path of Imre Nagy. The most that could be expected were concessions on the part of the Soviet Union, or more precisely a struggle able to exact such concessions, since it was the Soviet Union which dominated the situation. Basing themselves on this understanding, different groups of intellectuals seeking political consolidation in the spirit of compromise came up with various schemes.

The most noteworthy of these schemes was that of Bibó, a minister of state in Imre Nagy's government, a populist peasant socialist and one of the leaders of the Petöfi Party ²². We should cast a glance at this scheme because it clearly represented the political problems which were later to play an important role in the activity of the Central Workers' Council and because it to a certain extent influenced it.

His scheme proposed an agreement with the Soviet Union on the basis of mutual guarantees. It involved the phased evacuation of Soviet troops and a possible Hungarian withdrawal from the Warsaw pact. The Imre Nagy government could furnish the necessary guarantees for a bilateral pact with the Soviet Union. Bibó thought it necessary to retain the essential conquests of the revolution, in particular the system of workers' councils and revolutionary committees, until a constituent assembly could settle the social and constitutional principles upon which the country would be run. Afterwards, there would be collective ownership of the means of production and a majority of lay members at the head of a thoroughly decentralised and 'autonomised' administration.

The scheme quickly became known in intellectual circles and rapidly gained ground. It became the basis for the actions and programme of the intellectuals. Organisations such as the Writers' Association, the Journalists' Association, the Revolutionary Committee of Intellectuals and the Students' Revolutionary Committee and other groups large and small drew up similar schemes and demands. They organised their political struggle on this basis and saw a real chance of a way out in this compromise.

But the scheme contained a contradiction which arose from the circumstances themselves. It sought to preserve the essential gains of the revolution whereas there was no actual political force organised to defend them. Acceptance of the plan thus came to rest with the good will of the Soviet Union, which was unthinkable. It had to be imposed on the Soviet Union, which meant a political struggle had to be organised and led. That was the key to the problem. The Imre Nagy government collapsed and only a Hungaro-Soviet agreement could easily revive it. Kádár and his team were automatically excluded from the compromise, since they were too closely identified with the Soviet Union. So how were they to come to an agreement? By what means could it be imposed?

In seeking these means, Bibó and the intellectuals in general turned their eyes to the workers. They saw and encouraged the growing activity of the

councils. The movement developed in such a way as to give grounds for hope to those seeking a force to carry off the compromise. Thus the intellectuals saw the councils as the serious force they were looking for to bring about the compromise, the only realistic policy under the circumstances of the day. For that reason they tried to suggest to the councils that they should constitute themselves as an organised force. Many intellectuals visited the factories, participated in meetings of the councils and made speeches to the workers. Journalists, students and members of the Petöfi Circle tried to form a common front with the workers. The most noteworthy representative of this tendency was the indefatigable Miklós Gimes, the leader simultaneously of several revolutionary organisations and a personal friend of Imre Nagy²³.

The Ujpest initiative

The workers and the councils representing them were obliged by the force of circumstances to rally together and unite their efforts. Practical experience led them to do so. On 12 November, as the delegates of the workers' councils of the 11th district were meeting, further out in Ujpest important talks were taking place in the Council House (the district town hall). This meeting in Ujpest took the far more conscious initiative to rally together and organise concretely the workers' forces, i.e. their councils.

It was an interesting day. During the morning the Stalinist members of the former Ujpest council²⁴ held a meeting protected by Soviet tanks rumbling past the front of the building. But interestingly -- and this is characteristic of the time -- the members of the Ujpest Revolutionary Workers' Council set up during the revolution also took part in that meeting. The result of this 'communion' was of course a lot of screaming and shouting. The old-regime Stalinists let off a few bombastic revolutionary phrases, just like Kádár and his friends, while the members of the workers' council opposed everything. That is what it was like at the time: the Stalinists returned under the protection of Soviet bayonets, but the revolutionary bodies remained in place. All this contributed to the chaos and uncertainty but hindered the reorganisation of the revolutionary forces.

Realising that this situation was impossible, the members of the Revolutionary Council left the office to meet elsewhere. Let us pause here for a moment. Simple as it is, this fact is so eloquent that one could well wonder how anyone could have believed there was any basis for an immediate reconciliation of the forces of revolution and those of intervention. On the contrary, everything pointed to the fact that any consolidation would require a political struggle, even if the outcome was only a compromise. A compromise above all can only result from a bitter struggle between opposing forces.

The Ujpest Revolutionary Workers' Council started its meeting. As was the general practice, some young intellectuals took part in the meeting. They proposed that the Council should take the initiative in launching a call for the formation of a central workers' council. The proposal was quickly accepted, since the workers present wanted exactly the same thing. Among them, József

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

Balázs, a worker in the 'Láng' factory, who represented the workers' council of the 13th district²⁵ became one of the most enthusiastic promoters of the Central Workers' Council.

An intellectual took the floor and explained that the workers' attitude and policy of merely opposing the Kádár government was ineffective, doubly so because it could not last. That is why, he went on, the workers should by-pass both the Stalinists in the administration and the Kádár government in the country. If they wanted to negotiate with the real power, they should do so with the people who really held it, i.e. with the Soviet army and government²⁶. But certain conditions would make the negotiations more favourable, the intellectual continued. First of all it was necessary to represent the organised strength of the whole working class, and only a Central Workers' Council could do so. Secondly, it was important that that body should have a proper tactical control of such specifically working-class forms of struggle as strike action and other political demonstrations. For that reason the Central Council should have the unanimous confidence of the working class.

The intellectual explained moreover that in his view if the workers and their central body laid the stress on negotiations with Kádár that would be *de facto* recognition of that government. The result would be that the government would consider the central body as a tool in its hands or would temporise until the time was right and then close it down.

The Ujpest Revolutionary Workers' Council quickly adopted as its own the proposal to call delegates of workers' councils together with a view to setting up the Central Council. The Council appealed to the young intellectuals present to write and circulate this call²⁷.

And they did. The text entitled 'Call', which has since become historic, was written and passed by the Council. It explained that the workers of Budapest wanted to establish order.

'Of course we do not want just any order', the Call said, 'but revolutionary order based on carrying out the great demands of the revolution. The workers of Budapest will fight on the one hand all those who dishonour our revolution with illegal acts, and on the other all those who only recognise the revolution in purely formal words and in its essentials wish to conjure it away.'²⁸

It is important to establish that the starting point for this Call, and thus of the workers' organised struggle, was the desire for political consolidation: order, as they called it. At the outset, they were not fighting for a preconceived, ideal programme, but were obliged to establish an 'order' in line with what they wanted. This realism, which had not a trace of so-called revolutionary dreaming, led them to see that the strike was as 'murderous' to them as it was to the government. Of course, this realism did not extend to senseless pragmatism. They wanted order, but a socialist order which they imagined more or less concretely. The essential fact was that they knew that such a socialism could

only come into being out of a political struggle conditioned by certain facts, such as, for example, the Soviet presence, and led by the working class made up of ordinary people. This clear-sightedness distinguished them both from adventurers and reactionaries who 'dishonour' the revolution and those who sided with the intervention. What they showed was a position which, while recognising certain realities, gave away nothing on the essential demands of the revolution.

Finally, the Call appealed to the factories of Budapest 'to send delegates from their councils to the town hall in Ujpest at one o'clock on Tuesday 13 November with a view to forming the Budapest Central Workers' Council'.

It appears to have been the intellectuals' proposal which determined the setting up of the Central Council. But this proposal merely met up with the movement unleashed by the workers with a view to organising themselves and seeking a form. It was not just a question of facts such as the working-class aspiration visible already before the Soviet intervention on 4 November, or, for example, the experiment carried out in the 11th district to co-ordinate the councils' activities. It was also a matter of the unreserved acceptance of this proposal by the Ujpest Revolutionary Workers' Council because they felt it was theirs. This proposal on the part of the intellectuals could only arise because they felt the clear tendency in the councils to form such an organisation. Thus it was a fortunate coincidence between the spontaneous aspirations of the workers and the conscious initiative of the intellectuals. This phenomenon stands out clearly in all eye-witness accounts.

'In the workers' council of the Hungarian State Optical Factory we raised the view that it would be necessary to take up a united position against the government, because we could achieve nothing against it by the methods used before 4 November. On 12 November we received a leaflet from the Ujpest Revolutionary Workers' Council calling together delegates from all the workers' councils in Budapest . . .'²⁹

That is why the councils responded so quickly to the Call. The ground had been carefully prepared. The young intellectuals took seriously the task they had been given by the Ujpest workers. The Students' Revolutionary Committee organised the duplication of the Call and its circulation in the factories. One of the intellectuals who took part in the Ujpest meeting set off for Csepel, while another made his way to the centre of working-class activity in the 11th district, the 'Beloianis' factory.³⁰

It is interesting to see how the most active local working-class centres in Budapest shaped up. In the enormous working class district of Ujpest and in the neighbouring 13th district, the 'Egyesült Izzó' (a big factory making light bulbs and radio components where the first initiative for workers' councils was launched before the 1956 revolution) and the 'Láng' and 'Magyar Acél' machine tool factories played the vanguard role. The factories in the 11th district, first and foremost the 'Beloianis' (formerly Standard) electrical factory and the

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

'Gamma' optical factory were the most active. The steel-making and engineering complex, together with the other Csepel factories, furnished the third important base which, together with those mentioned above, originated the formation of the Central Workers' Council and from which the effort to organise it started.

Thus we can fix the origins of the Central Workers' Council of Budapest both geographically and historically. Geographically, it was Ujpest and to a certain extent the 11th district, and to be more precise the Ujpest Revolutionary Workers' Council and the 'Beloianis' factory. Historically, the Central Workers' Council was born of the spontaneous movement of the workers and the activity of revolutionary intellectuals.

First steps towards setting up the Central Workers' Council

It would be wrong to assume that the birth of this revolutionary body was so simple and automatic. Many obstacles and hesitations had to be overcome and much experience had to be acquired in order to organise it. There was a whole struggle against unfavourable circumstances. People's consciousness also had to be developed so that the Council could gradually take shape. It would be superficial to think that these workers and even intellectuals knew exactly what they were doing.

The first meeting of workers' delegates

The delegates gathered in front of the Újpest Town hall on the afternoon of 13 November. Soon a rumour spread that the newly-organised security forces, together with Soviet units, had arrested the members of the Újpest Revolutionary Council and taken over the building. The workers acted quickly. The workers' council suggested to the delegates that the meeting should be held in their factory. The workers who had arrived 'sneaked into the factory' as an eye-witness was to write later:

'When we arrived' (at the Újpest town hall - BN), Sebastyén writes, 'we only found one delegate who sent us all to the 'Egysült Izzó' factory to avoid being spotted by the security forces who had been re-organised after 4 November.'³¹

From this it can be deduced that the counter-revolutionary central authorities did not stand idly by as the workers' movement developed. Unable to prevent the meeting, they did what they could. It should be noted that their information turned out to be very accurate, which means that the Kádár government knew perfectly well how important this meeting was, better, perhaps, than the workers themselves, many of whom had still not heard of the government decree aimed at limiting the powers of the councils that had come out that day. Nonetheless, the meeting was an immediate response to the decree, which shows the difference, not to say opposition, between the government's position and that of the workers.

A summary of the situation will help to give a better idea of the historical

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

circumstances in which the Central Workers' Council came into being.

It is clear from what I have already said that the workers' struggle after 4 November fell into two phases. In the first, from 4 - 10 November, the workers launched a general strike and carried on armed resistance in the big industrial areas. At the same time they re-organised the factory councils which shaped the workers demands.

The government was unable to improve the situation by the use of the Soviet army, hence its campaign against the councils. It realised that it would have to settle matters with them without giving anything away. As soon as the councils saw that they could not impose their wishes upon the government, either through the strike or through the unorganised strength of the councils, they realised they would need to consolidate their position, and that is how the second phase started.

It only lasted from 10 -12 November.

From the workers' efforts arose the idea of setting up a strong political body representing workers at the highest possible level and able to fight the government or at least make the government do what they wanted. These efforts met up with the attempts by intellectuals to bring about a compromise. This period of struggle was marked by events such as the scheme worked out by Bibó (9 November), the government's decree on revolutionary councils (12 November), the meeting of delegates from the workers' councils in the 11th district (12 November) and finally the meeting of the Revolutionary Workers' Council of Ujpest (12 November).

12 November was the culminating point. From that day on a new period opened. The workers and the government simultaneously realised that they would have to go one way or the other. So the government attacked the councils, trying to circumscribe their rights (decree of 13 November), while the workers' started to set up the Central Workers' Council.

This was an important moment, as the government realised. The 13 November meeting of workers' delegates opened a new chapter of political battle between two visibly opposing centres.

Let us go back to this meeting. In the light of the facts we can confirm the truth, recognised by historians, that a historical process such as the setting up of this Council is always more complex in practice than it sounds in bald summary.

What happened?

'In the factory' (Egysült Izzó - BN) 'delegates from several firms and districts were already present and we started proceedings immediately. But we soon realised that the representatives of many factories were still missing. So we decided to hold the meeting over until the following day and to inform the workers' councils of all firms above a certain size.'³²

Was the meeting a failure, then? I choose to believe, on the contrary, that this decision to hold the meeting over showed that the delegates present recognised its enormous importance and did not want to engage in an

adventure. Far from it, they decided to contact other factories and gather together representatives of the main factories.³³

A meeting with Kádár

Meanwhile, that is, between the two meetings, there was a discussion between Kádár and the workers.

Without adequate documents about the 13 November meeting, I cannot say with any certainty whether the workers' delegation was put together during that meeting or independently, but I imagine there was some connection between the two. The role that Sándor Bali, chairman of the 'Beloianis' factory council, played in these events tends to confirm this view.

Bali, a toolmaker-fitter and one of the most conscious workers, tried to rally the forces of the councils in the 11th district. It was more or less he who organised the meeting of the councils of the 11th district on 12 November. And it was no accident that one of the young intellectuals took the Ujpest Call to that same 'Beloianis' factory. It is consequently almost certain that Bali took part in the 13 November meeting at the 'Egysült Izzó' factory. And Bali headed the workers' delegation to parliament on the morning of the 14 November to discuss with Kádár. The delegation included representatives of the Csepel factories and the 'Magyar Acél' factory in the 13th district among others, which shows that it arose from a capital-wide gathering of workers. It is therefore possible that after the 13 November meeting some of the workers present formed this delegation in order to fill the gap left by a meeting that had no outcome.

The delegation presented the workers' demands to Kádár and demanded in particular:

- a) re-instatement of Imre Nagy as prime-minister, the right of several different parties to exist and the convening of the electoral assembly;
- b) withdrawal of Soviet troops;
- c) recognition of the workers' councils and their right to take over the factories as collective property;
- d) recognition of the workers' right to strike;
- e) re-establishment of democratic trade unions and immediate cessation of activity on the part of those unions acting as 'transmission belts'.³⁴

If we compare these demands with those made by the delegates of the 11th district, at first sight it seems that the workers' demands were couched in more concrete and circumspect terms and were put forward more prudently. Whereas the 11th district's resolution spoke about a general *extension* of the councils' sphere of activity in the economic, social and cultural domains, all the workers asked for this time was *recognition* of the councils. There is another example: the 11th district's resolution asked that the factories etc. should become the property of the workers, whereas now they merely demanded the councils

should have the right to own the factories. There are therefore differences of emphasis. Finally, the demand about unions is new and typically working-class.

But although these two sets of demands were different, their kinship was clear, and if the content of the resolution of 12 November had been toned down, this was most likely the result of tactical considerations. A delegation presenting prudent and limited demands, with somewhat of a working-class character, to a 'workers' and peasants' government' could hope to win concessions. It is interesting to see that the workers were at pains to make their demands acceptable. And one looks in vain for the demand for the arming of the workers which figured in the 11th district's resolution.

It may seem an exaggeration to imagine that the two sets of demands were somehow related. Nevertheless the very man who, with others, worked out the 11th district's resolution - Bali - also subsequently led the delegation. Of course it is possible that the delegation members thought differently from the delegates of the 11th district, and that Bali consequently had to change his demands. But knowing how Bali worked and his political acumen, I imagine that he himself, guided by a tactical sense, suggested prudent demands.

This digression enables me to make two important points at the same time. The first is that the workers knew the value of tactics very well. Perhaps it is not too much to believe that they wanted to trap the 'workers' government by using working-class demands to expose it. Slanders from the left and the right notwithstanding, these workers were quite competent to carry out a political struggle. The other is that if you want to find out what Hungarian workers really intended during and after the revolution it is not enough just to keep on quoting what they say or said. Quotations are worthless without an analysis of the circumstances and conditions.

But let me get back to those circumstances. At the end of the talks with Kádár, the delegation told him that the workers would continue the strike until these demands were met.

Kádár's reply was brief, haughty and brutal. The workers could do as they please, he said. If they wouldn't work, that was up to them. The government would work. The delegation had the right not to recognise his government, but that did not bother him, since the Soviet Union did support it.

Bali and the others understood that Kádár and his team felt very secure and they realised that they would have to put more weight behind their words. The fact that their delegation, representing several factories, had been received by Kádár while other, less representative, ones had been dismissed did not escape them and proved that unity gives strength. At the same time Kádár's assurance convinced them to increase this strength and organise it better. Testing the ground in this way also allowed them to gauge the government's reaction before deciding how they themselves were to behave.

Setting up the Central Workers' Council

In the factories, the workers were becoming increasingly impatient and put pressure on their councils to struggle more effectively against the intolerable presence of the Soviet army and the counter-revolutionary government and to defend their own revolutionary aims. The strike went on and weighty responsibilities were imposed on the factory representatives. Feelings ran high at meetings where workers stated their intention to hold out and achieve a settlement on a revolutionary basis. They wanted results, and since Kádár and his team were making no concessions at all, it was inevitable that an organised force of workers would arise.

Assembling the delegates and attendance at the meeting

The telephone lines were extremely busy on 14 November: the workers were getting ready for the meeting that evening and the phones in the factories kept ringing.

During the afternoon the delegates started to gather in front of the Ujpest town hall and then slowly made their way to the 'Egysült Izzó' factory, since the town hall was still occupied by the armed forces.

It is worth looking at precisely who the 'workers' and peasants' government' sent these troops against. Was it, as they kept repeating, some 'dubious elements' influencing the working class?

We know enough about the origins and the activities of the workers' councils to say that they arose quite naturally out of direct workers' democracy. What 'workers' representative would dare claim, without looking ridiculous, that the working class can be mobilised by 'dubious elements'? That would mean, after ten years of education in people's democracy, that the working class was incapable of managing its own affairs. But how come it was these 'dubious elements' who influenced the workers and not the 'workers' government?

Let us put the lies to one side. We do know certain facts about how representatives for the Ujpest meeting were selected. Workers met in the factories to pick their delegates. This is how it was done in the telephone factory in the 14th district:

"The election of delegates took place democratically from the bottom upwards. First of all, in the factories, the workers themselves picked which member of the workers' council would go to the meeting. It was the workers as a whole who picked him, not the workers' council."³⁵

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

In the big factories in Budapest the workers elected their delegates and mandated them at meetings, particularly at the 'Beloianis' factory. It could not have been any other way because, as we shall see later, the councils could not have existed unless they were really representative.

It is difficult to establish exactly how many delegates there were. Various sources (for example *Népszabadság*) say that 400 - 500 delegates were present, but the real meeting involved far fewer people. It is true that there were a lot of workers in and around the factory recreation hall, 400 - 500 perhaps, because another meeting was being held at the same time. The delegates mixed with this mass of workers as they arrived and so, when the meeting started, a lot of these workers took part in it ³⁶.

Without idealising the spontaneous way this meeting was organised, I must state that, important as it was, it did without bureaucratic organisation, a check on credentials, stewards, etc. You could say that there was disorder, and in a way it is true. But this only serves to underline an important factor, namely that the birth of the Central Workers Council had the support of a mass meeting of workers. A parliament where representatives and those they represented had the same right to speak is disorder, to be sure, but of a high quality!

The make-up of the delegates puts everything the government said to ridicule. Without going into detail, I shall pick out two interesting characteristics which I have already mentioned in the make-up of the factory councils.

The first is that many of the older delegates were militant workers of long standing in the movement. They had cut their teeth in the syndicalist struggle during the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919 and in the Social Democratic Party. During the Stalinist period, many of them had been put in prison for their socialist ideas and practices. Many of them had been in the Communist Party just after the war, when it put itself forward as a real workers' party. As time passed, they remained workers and realised what a 'big lie' the party was, either in prison or on the outer fringes of the movement. Ninety percent of the members of the workers' council at the telephone factory, for example, were members of the Communist Party. But the best way to illustrate the make-up of the workers' councils, and this meeting in particular, is through the example of Sándor Bali.

A worker at the 'Beloianis' factory, Bali spent a long time in the Social Democratic Party. After the liberation in 1945 he joined the Communist Party but remained an ordinary worker despite the great wave of worker-promotions between 1948 and 1950³⁷. Precisely because of his working-class experience he dropped out of activity as a Party member and found himself in opposition to the apparatus. His is the classic example of relations between the working class and the Communist Party, and of the development and transformation of this relationship in a state run by the Communists.

It was these former syndicalists, Social-Democrats, Communists and members of other socialist tendencies who joined together in the council. In this way the councils, and their 14 November meeting, really put the unity of

the working class into practice, but without apparatuses and parties, and resting only on the spontaneous activity of the workers.

The other characteristic of the workers' councils was the massive participation by young people. Almost half the members and delegates were young workers aged between 23 and 28 years old. Do not forget that when the old regime collapsed in 1945 they were only between 12 and 17 years old, so they had been brought up by the people's democracy.

These two characteristics meant that the delegates were balanced, with a variety of experience on one hand and dynamic energy on the other. The list of factories represented too is itself an indication that the best elements of the Budapest working class were at the meeting.

Delegates were present from the following factories: Csepel Steelmaking and Engineering Combine, Csepel Vegetable Oil Factory, Csepel Vehicle Builders, Beloiannis, Telephone Factory, Tramway Company, Mávag, Ganz Electrical Works, Ganz Wagon Works, Aluminium Factory, Láng, Magyar Acél, Ganz Shipyard, Hazai Fésüsfontó (a big textile mill in the 20th district), Egyesült Izzó, Magyar Pamut (a big textile mill in Ujpest), Hungarian National Optical Works, Gamma, etc.

Thus almost all of the big firms were represented. Eight or nine of the capital's districts also took part, either indirectly in the shape of the big factories, or through delegates from the district councils who thus represented several factories.

Some provincial delegates were also present, particularly, for example, from two of the most active provincial workers' councils (of the industrial region of Borsod and the industrial city of Győr).

On the basis of the attendance at meeting, we can say that it was an important event, the most important since the revolution. For that reason some intellectuals also participated as representatives of various organisations of the intelligentsia or in a personal capacity. This underscored yet again the revolutionary alliance of workers and intellectuals which had already contributed greatly to the preparatory work for the Central Workers' Council.³⁹

Unanimous demands

The delegates assembled; the members of the host workers' council at 'Egyesült Izzó' took the platform, and one of them opened the meeting.

The opening remarks contained general comments about the 'historical necessity' of the meeting which are themselves very revealing. First of all, the assembled workers had only quite vague notions of the *concrete* tasks, methods and tactics facing united and co-ordinated workers' councils. As one of the eye-witnesses, an intellectual, was to write later: 'The workers clearly were so sure of their own strength that they did not even see the complexity of the situation'. This meant that the workers felt quite able to create a new central power of their own, but their ignorance and inexperience made it difficult to work out concrete tasks. This resulted in uncertainty about formulating tactical methods

and problems.

But while there was uncertainty over the clear and rapid choice of immediate tasks, there was certainty and clear-sightedness when it came to adopting programmatic positions and demands. One of the participants, Ferenc Töke, who was later to become a member of the Central Workers' Council, wrote that: 'Everybody unanimously wanted a Central Council which could organise the workers' councils in the districts and the big factories, but they did not know how to set it up and on what basis.'³⁹

It was relatively simple and straightforward to formulate the aims of the Central Council, i.e. its programme, especially since: 'at the meeting to set up the Council, everybody, although they came from different factories, wanted exactly the same thing, just as if they had agreed their views in advance'. The intellectual eye-witness quoted above also noted that 'the uniformity of the programmatic points, although they had arisen in isolation from one another, and in the formulation of aims, was fascinating'.⁴⁰

Let us look at these aims and the workers' programme.

It was almost identical with previous demands. The resolution of the delegates of the workers councils of the 11th district and the demands presented to Kádár during the morning summed up the workers' unanimous desires, since they were to be heard again at this meeting.

But this time there were small but very important differences. Taking the floor one after the other, the delegates forcefully emphasised their demand 'to put the factories into truly collective ownership and not into capitalist ownership'.

This was hardly surprising, since they knew that the workers' councils did not represent any real force or authority unless they had the factories in their hands. This collective ownership was the basis of the workers' council. Under the prevailing circumstances, delegates were insisting on it less against the capitalists than against the centralist and bureaucratic reorganisation of economic life by the Kádár government. It was their unequivocal response to the government decree of 13 November.

The other important thing the delegates insisted on was to do with the demand for a multi-party system. The workers only wanted parties which recognised the socialist gains and stood for socialist principles.

These points came up frequently in the delegates' speeches and were closely bound up together. It stands to reason that workers who spoke in favour of a system of council ownership of the factories would refuse in any way to recognise parties which could or would deprive them of it.

So those who say that the workers wanted a multi-party system, as has been done endlessly, and not altogether wrongly, since the revolution, should not 'forget' that they meant socialist parties.

The meeting, then, took a clear stand in favour of a multi-party system. I shall analyse later this fundamental problem of the relationship between the councils and the parties. For the moment we should remember that workers not only did not reject, but actually demanded, parties.

The speakers also dealt with general so-called national demands. The delegates expressed the desires of those who had elected them for the withdrawal of Soviet troops, the re-instatement of Imre Nagy, guarantees of democratic rights, etc.

During the course of the meeting a unanimous programme arose which, while emphasising working-class socialist demands, also dealt with those of a national character, all the more so since the workers saw socialism as a system determined by national conditions and the nation based on a socialist society. As the Central Workers' Council was to write later:

'We re-affirm that we have been given our mission by the working class. True to that mission we are ready to defend our factories and our country, with our lives if necessary, against any attempt at a capitalist restoration. But at the same time we proclaim our desire to build the social and economic order in the Hungarian way in our own independent country, and we shall not abandon any of the demands of the revolution.'⁴¹

Discussion on the political line and organisational problems

But how to put this clearly-formulated programme into practice remained a problem. Although all of the delegates emphasised their refusal to recognise the Kádár government and recognised the Nagy government as the legal one, no-one put forward any policies to achieve this.

At this point Krassó, the same intellectual who had taken part in the meeting of the Ujpest Revolutionary Workers' Council, asked for permission to speak. He tried to explain the position of the intellectuals, the same position he had already put forward at the Ujpest meeting. This rested essentially on Bibó's plan, which he rounded out by saying that the only force which could carry it out was the working class.

But he was shouted down. The Egyesült Izzó worker chairing the meeting expressed some doubt about his right to speak, seeing in him the influence of the Ujpest Workers' Council, rivals of the Egyesült Izzó factory.

Why not mention a certain spirit of rivalry which could be detected between some of the councils in the big factories and those of the districts? The Egyesült Izzó factory, for example, was where the most advanced workers worked and was the unchallenged home of the council movement. But its workers' council was in competition with the council which covered the whole of the Ujpest district. But something else was involved too: the workers kept a sharp look-out to prevent any non-working class influence on the meeting. They wanted everything that was said and decided upon to really come from the workers and them alone.'⁴²

Questioned by the chairman, Krassó admitted that he did not represent any factory, and nothing further came of his speech or the problem he raised.

It looked as if the 'Egyesült Izzó' workers on the platform had condemned it to being nothing more than a discussion about the 'greatness of the moment'. These workers were so attached to problems of a general theoretical nature that

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

the meeting seemed to forget its essential aim, the setting up of the Central Workers' Council.

In his speech, Krassó had proposed protesting to the government over the arrest of the members of the Ujpest Revolutionary Workers' Council. When the workers on the platform called him to order, the Csepel delegates spoke in favour of his proposal and the delegates supported them. Then there occurred a little incident which involved a challenge to the chair. Once more there was uproar, and those hoping for a concrete and positive outcome feared a rebuff.

Then Bali started to speak. He told them about his talks with Kádár, explained what he made of them, and told the delegates that the 'Beloianis' workers had already heard about these negotiations and accepted his proposals. The workers' starting-point, Bali went on, should be non-recognition of the Kádár government. But on the other hand they would have to create a body and impose it on the government. Only that body would be able to force the necessary concessions out of Kádár. He told the delegates they should set up the Central Workers' Council which, based on the general strike, would bring together the workers' demands and transmit them to the government. The strike would continue until they were accepted.

One by one, the delegates spoke in favour of Bali's proposal. They emphasised that Kádár's rejection made a show of force by the working class necessary in order to force him to accept their demands and in conclusion, increased the need to set up a Central Workers' Council.

The growing agreement showed that the meeting was well on the way to achieving its aim of setting up a Council.

But several delegates could see further. Some put forward the idea of subsequently setting up a national central council which would express the wishes of workers all over the country. This was a perfectly obvious proposal, which was why many delegates applauded it. Nevertheless, some objected on the one hand that their mandate only stretched to setting up a Central Workers' Council for Greater Budapest and on the other that the absence of many provincial delegates made it impossible to take a decision.

The general agreement shown with these objections may seem a small thing, especially since a National Council would have been politically more effective and a greater danger to the government. But this problem, at first sight organisational, gives an insight into a very important feature of the councils. That is to say, the workers approached the question of a National Council not only from the point of view of its political effectiveness but also, and above all, in a democratic spirit.

Hugarian workers and their delegates saw the council's democratic nature as their greatest asset. They saw it in the close-knit relationship between the delegates and the whole working class, a relationship in which the delegates were merely those with the responsibility of carrying out the will of the working class. It should be noted that, in this council movement, workers often re-called delegates who departed from their mandate. They did not like their delegates to be too 'independent'. It is therefore understandable that delegates paid great

attention to putting democracy into effect, even in the smallest detail. But the general atmosphere of the Hungarian revolution also contributed to reinforcing this attitude of making sure that there was the widest possible democracy. The revolution had broken out against a pitiless dictatorship which suppressed the slightest sign of democracy and completely neglected the will of the people. Hence in a certain sense the Hungarian revolution championed democracy, wore it like a badge and really wanted to introduce it. That was why democratic etiquette loomed so large in the attitude of the revolutionaries.

This insistence on observing the rules of democracy was shown more than once in the course of the meeting. On several occasions delegates emphasised that the existing councils were only provisional, and proposed general elections as soon as possible in the factories to elect councils enjoying the confidence of the whole working class.

It is necessary to emphasise this important phenomenon because certain western friends of the Hungarian revolution occasionally seem to forget the importance of political democracy and feel irritated by the, in their eyes, excessive attachment to this democracy on the part of Hungarian (or Polish) revolutionaries. But there is yet another, even more important, reason. This tendency thus to re-establish a direct and consequently simple and straightforward democracy raised, even in the founding meeting, a contradiction which was to be more or less marked in the activities of the Central Workers' Council. This was a contradiction between the requirements of effective politics and the nature of a new social and political system based on the workers' councils. To be effective in politics, you have to select quite different tactics and methods than those required for building a new society based on workers' democracy.

In the concrete case of the National Workers' Council, for example, the formation of such a body would have given the workers much greater and more effective political weight. The government, for example, would certainly have found itself in a much more embarrassing position. On the other hand, forming such a council would perhaps have made it easier to mobilise and involve workers in the provinces. But this is only a hypothesis, and as such is not as good as it appears. These workers' perhaps astonishing attachment to democratic methods was an advantage, as we shall see later, because it made it easier for some energetic workers' councils in the provinces (the miners in the North, for example) to join the Central Workers' Council, even though they were for a time critical of the politics of the Greater Budapest Central Workers' Council⁴³. So political 'effectiveness' isn't always the most effective thing.

It is interesting to see how, once a form had been suggested to them, workers who had found it quite hard to find a means to express their strength were able to push it much further. The proposal to build a National Council revealed the workers' instinctive intention to establish their own separate power. However, although this desire expressed their strength, it was not possible at that moment to carry it out.

The meeting decided to set up the Greater Budapest Central Workers' Council and to make this news known to the workers present in the factory's

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

recreation hall. But those present felt such an announcement would not be enough to satisfy the workers, who above all wanted a plan of action.

So the meeting moved on to discuss the practical tasks facing the Council. Everybody, delegates or not, uttered their opinion at the same time, and the result was chaos. The odd thing is that this time the workers realised such a disorganised meeting was incapable of taking decisions and felt they needed an executive body. A proposal arose to set up a committee formed if possible of one member from each district and charged with drafting a resolution to put to the vote.

Thus was born the Executive Committee which later became the Central Council, without in the process losing its links with the working class and becoming a leading body in the usual sense of the word. Before looking at the composition of this body, we should note a specific characteristic of the Hungarian workers' councils, i.e. that each step on the way to setting up the Central Council was taken slowly and only under the constraining force of circumstances. Hungarian workers had no - or very few - ideas and theories worked out in advance and had to learn what they needed to do as they went along. This was true even of the simplest organisational matters. Thus even in the tiniest details their experiences were truly those of the working class and reflected the genuine intentions of the Hungarian working class.

It is unfortunately not possible, nor perhaps will it ever be, to reconstruct a complete list of the 20 or 22 people who withdrew to draw up a resolution. Nevertheless, some of them are known and listed here in alphabetical order.

Babai József, delegate of the Tram company, who was to become the secretary and as such responsible for the administrative business of the Central Council.

Balázs Arpád, a worker in the mining equipment factory and delegate for Ujpest.

Balázs József, a lathe-operator in the Magyar Acél factory, delegate of the 13th district. A militant of long standing in the engineering workers' union, he joined the Communist Party in 1945. One of those who promoted the idea of the Central Workers Council and became its spokesman. The oldest member of the Council.

Balázs Sándor, fitter-toolmaker, militant of long standing in the engineering workers' union, represented the Egyesült Izzó factory.

Bali Sándor, fitter-toolmaker, delegate of the 11th district and the Beloiannis factory, aged about 38. I mentioned him earlier.

Dévényi, worker, delegate from the Csepel Steelmaking and Engineering Combine. (Later he was to fall under suspicion of representing the interests of the government and was removed from the Council.)

Kalocsai György, chemical engineer, aged about 32. Delegate from the Csepel Vegetable Oil factory and from Csepel. He was to become vice-president of the Council.

Karsai, a fitter-engineer, a worker in the Radiator factory, aged 26. Delegate

from the 10th district.

Sebestyén Miklós, engineer, aged 26, delegate from the Hungarian National Optical Works. He was later to be responsible for press matters.

Töke Ferenc, fitter-toolmaker, delegate of the 14th district and the Telephone factory.

A worker-student at the Polytechnic University aged 26. He was later to be responsible for the organisational business of the Central Council.

Incomplete as this list is, it nevertheless allows us to examine the make-up of the Central Workers' Council, since the proportions were to remain about the same.

We should note first of all that like all the factory councils it was made up of a very balanced mixture of young and older members. The relatively big presence of young people reflected the dynamic, combative character of the revolution. But the massive presence of young people, which was later to grow perceptibly, illustrated an interesting political fact.

All these young people had been educated in a people's democracy. Their experiences were therefore quite different from those of their comrades or precursors in the capitalist system. They knew Communist politics as well as nationalised property, planning, etc. Moreover, they only knew that system. These young people were very hard to understand for anybody who does not have a complete knowledge of working-class life in a people's democracy. Why? Because these young people had been able to learn socialist ideas and principles in an organised way and identified with them while rejecting the system of socialism so far known to them. A contradiction, you might say, but is there not something very promising about a situation where workers energetically reject a socialism which comes from above in order to try and construct their own? If socialism is supposed to be a matter for the working class and not the apparatuses, should it not be placed in the hands of the workers?

Better yet, these workers on the Central Council learned a lot. They knew very well that some of the changes and transformations that had taken place during the people's democracy were acceptable and that it was right to talk about the achievements of socialism. On the other hand they knew that the traps to avoid are, in the majority of cases, those which seem the most tempting to those who have not undergone the 'socialist experiment'.

While we are talking about the achievements they wanted to keep, we should note one very important one; widespread access to education. It was and still is a real gain for the workers, who were able easily to obtain a school and university education.

It is remarkable, for example, that in the list quoted above, we find three young men (Karsai, Sebestyén, Töke) had all trained as engineers under the people's democracy. The only exception, Töke, had everything except a degree certificate in 1956. Töke himself said this about this phenomenon:

'Many of the workers were well-educated. In the ten years' (of people's

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

democracy - BN) 'that had passed, we had done nothing but study, because it was a way of avoiding reading party pamphlets . . . The workers like engineers who were former workers a lot, more than other administrative personnel, because they were with them in the factories and mixed with them on good terms.'⁴⁴

Let us look at the membership of the Council from the point of view of political experience. As concerns the younger members there is nothing to add. As for the older members, Sándor Bali, József Balázs and Sándor Balázs, they had taken part in the working-class struggle in the engineering workers' union in the long years leading up to 1945. This was the most militant union under the Horthy regime and even before it, and its revolutionary struggles had earned it fame as the uncontested vanguard of the working class. Many experienced revolutionary workers came from among its ranks.

Let us now look at the membership of the council according to their trades. Of these ten members, seven were engineering workers (later Sándor Rác made it eight). At the same time there were four professionally qualified engineers, three of them young men from a working-class background. It is interesting to note that several of these engineering workers were fitter-toolmakers: Sándor Bali, Sándor Balázs and later Sándor Rác. This is interesting, since the job is known to require a developed intelligence. The fitter-toolmaker works independently since, in general, he makes one-off jobs, so that his work is incompatible with the production line. The fitter-toolmaker is called the aristocrat of engineering workers. In Hungary, for example, this layer of workers has over decades provided notable fighters for the workers' movement.

So these young and dynamic workers turned professional engineer and these older workers more experienced in the working-class struggle under the capitalist regime went off to draw up resolutions expressing what the Budapest working class wanted.

The birth of the Greater Budapest Central Workers' Council and its first resolutions.

Unfortunately they took no minutes. They did not want to leave any clues for the government security services. However much the historian understands this attitude, he is still left unable to recount the discussions that took place between these 20 to 22 people. We do know that these discussions were very lively and fairly long and that they finally led to a resolution.

They supported Bali's proposal and decided to set up the Greater Budapest Central Workers' Council, stating that they did not have the right to establish a National Council. Especially, as the delegates explained later, since even some of the Budapest factories were not represented. That is why the first task was to obtain their affiliation and thus to consolidate the Central Workers' Council.

'The Central Workers' Council agrees to the following proposal: Workers'

Councils should be set up in each district of Budapest under the leadership of the biggest factories, and should send their delegates to the Greater Budapest Central Workers' Council.²⁴⁵

The Central Council's first priority, then, was to strengthen itself, give itself a solid basis and strike roots deep in the working class. It needed this added strength in order the better to fight against the government. Making sure that it was as representative as possible was a very basic task, since only indissoluble links with the working class could give it the strength it needed. Thus the Council's first preoccupations were of an organisational and not a programmatic nature. The practical struggle, the movement, led it to programmatic considerations.

At the same time, however, the Council decided to make immediate contact with the government to tell it that the Council had been set up and present its demands. The committee of delegates therefore formulated a resolution about the setting up of the Council and its demands. Here it is:

'Today, 14 November 1956, delegates from district workers' councils have set up the Greater Budapest Central Workers' Council. The Central Workers' Council has been given the authority to negotiate on behalf of all the firms situated within Budapest, and to call stoppages of work and returns to work. We proclaim our rigorous respect for the principles of socialism. We regard the means of production as collective property which we are at all times ready to defend.

1. We, the workers, believe that the restoration of calm and order requires that leadership should be invested in a person who enjoys the confidence of the people. We therefore propose that comrade Imre Nagy should take over leadership of the government.
2. We protest against the fact that members of the former state security services (AVH) have been appointed to the new security bodies. We want the people making up these new security bodies to be recruited among young revolutionaries and members of the police and the army who have remain loyal to the people and the factory workers. The new security body must not under any circumstances protect the interests of the party or of private individuals.
3. We demand guarantees of absolute freedom for all freedom-fighters, including Pál Maléter and his comrades. We demand the release of all those currently held.
4. We demand the rapid withdrawal of Soviet troops in order to strengthen friendship between our country and the USSR. Our country should be guaranteed the opportunity of peaceful reconstruction.
5. We demand that the radio and the press should cease spreading information which does not correspond with the facts.
6. Until these demands are met, we will only allow firms to carry out the minimum work necessary to secure the population's daily life.

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

Maintenance and reconstruction work will only be done in response to immediate needs of the national economy.

7. We demand the abolition of the one-party system and recognition only of parties based on socialism.

8. Work will be resumed as soon as we receive satisfactory answers.⁴⁶

The general character of this resolution is first and foremost political, as Ernő Király wrote in the work quoted (p. 39). Thus the Central Workers' Council presented itself as a political body which, knowing its own power, called for acceptance of its demands.

Analysis of the resolution shows that this body was based on three fundamental principles:

- a) collective ownership of the means of production;
- b) workers or the workers' militia to be integrated into the security service.
- c) existence of several socialist parties.

A fourth principle should be added which does not figure in the text but is at the root of all: the system of workers' councils.

Secondly, the Central Workers' Council emerged as the spokesman of the nation, of the Hungarian people, in its struggle for independence against the foreign invader. By including national demands among the working-class and socialist demands, it identified with the national struggle and became the nation's best qualified representative. Have no fear! The nation represented by the Central Workers' Council was no bourgeois complex but a society, a whole, made up of people and groups having the same language and customs and wanting to form a type of socialism. On the other hand, in protesting against the Soviet intervention, the Council was in no way anti-Soviet, since it demanded withdrawal 'in order to strengthen friendship between our country and the USSR'.

Thirdly, while representing the working class and the people and refusing to recognise the Kádár government, the Council did not grant itself power. It merely demanded that power should be given to a government headed by Imre Nagy. I shall try to analyse later whether this was a weakness or not. For the moment we should simply note the fact, adding that the Central Workers' Council stated that it represented the workers of *Budapest* and by this fact alone confined itself to being no more than a body that was certainly political but was not a power representing the whole country.

Let us also note that this resolution was not a programme. The Central Workers' Council 'merely' wanted to set out fundamental demands in announcing that it had been set up. As workers' representatives they summarised what the workers were demanding, claiming no role other than that of intermediary.

Nevertheless, the resolution spoke from a position of strength. If the

Central Council did not at all demand power, it did, on the other hand, have the power to get the country back to work. It is no accident that the resolution mentions strikes at three points. It made it clear that only the Central Council could decide when work would be stopped and resumed. It should be noted that in saying this the Central Council on the one hand put the trade unions in the shade, seeing itself, for the moment, as the *only* representative of the working class, and on the other showed the significance of the political dimension of the strike. Finally, in order to reassure the population, it stated that work would be resumed in those jobs 'necessary to secure the population's daily life'.

But the eighth point was a severe warning to the government: 'Work will be resumed as soon as we receive satisfactory answers'.

We can thus state that at the founding meeting the workers were not planning a compromise but wanted to force the acceptance of their demands as a whole through a general strike.

Having written the resolution, the committee of delegates picked the group which was to go and meet Kádár that same night. Twelve or fourteen members present were picked to form a delegation headed by Dévényi, the Csepel delegate⁴⁷.

They chose Árpád Balázs, the delegate from the Újpest district which had first backed the Central Council, as provisional president. However, the delegates present neglected to invite Sándor Balázs, who was also from Újpest representing the 'Egyesült Izzó' factory. This wounded his feelings, but he later took part in the work of the Central Council nevertheless.

Finally, all the various resolutions were adopted and placed in front of the workers present who voted for them unanimously. Thus started the brief and combative life of the Central Council of Greater Budapest which was rich in events and experiences.

'As everyone knows, the Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest was formed on 14 November on the initiative of the big firms in order to coordinate the work of the factory workers' councils and to represent their demands.'⁴⁸

Shaping the policies and tactics of the Central Council

The Central Workers' Council was born on 14 November. But the process of its formation did not end that day. Embedded in the events of the previous days, it continued into the following day. So far we have seen how it was made up organisationally. Let us now examine how its policies and tactics were shaped.

The delegation's meeting with Kádár

We know a lot about these negotiations with Kádár⁴⁹ from different sources. They all more or less agree on the facts.

Kádár understood that this time he was not just dealing with factory councils or even a delegation from a temporary alliance of big plants, and realised that a lot would depend on the outcome of the government's first meeting with the Central Workers' Council. He therefore adopted a conciliatory attitude.

The workers, on the other hand, came with the idea of forcing the government to make a favourable response to their demands. They were not thinking in terms of a compromise. They were conscious of their strength and knew that the government could do nothing about the strike.

The delegation presented the resolution and demands adopted a few hours earlier by the Council.

Let us look at Kádár's response:

He wisely avoided an overall response which would only have led to a 'dangerous' discussion on what the creation of the Central Workers' Council meant. He used 'salami' tactics, replying to one point at a time.

On point 1, he said that Imre Nagy was in a foreign embassy and that it was therefore impossible to communicate with him. It was not out of the question, he said, that Nagy would leave the Yugoslav embassy, in which case negotiations could take place and perhaps agreement be reached.

To their demand for a system with several socialist parties, Kádár replied:

'Let us consider the position of the Party's monopoly. We want a multi-party system and really free elections. We know it won't be easy, because if workers' power can be destroyed by force, it can equally be destroyed by a free vote. It is possible that we may suffer a resounding defeat in the elections, but we shall participate in the struggles of the election campaign because the Communist Party will thus be able to regain the confidence of the mass of the workers (but) . . . throwing the Communists out of Parliament would inevitably

lead to the defeat of socialism and of people's power.'

He added that even if the leaders of certain parties accepted socialism, their own parties, because of their social composition, would get rid of them. Consequently only a workers' party was capable of defending the factories and the land. Quite obviously he 'forgot' that the workers, too, only accepted socialist *parties* and were not talking about socialist *leaders*. And then, if a party got rid of its socialist leaders and turned into a bourgeois party, the workers would be the first to counter it.

Kádár went on to deal with another point, the request for assistance from the Soviet army, which he said was necessary and inevitable.

'In the course of recent events, we have witnessed demonstrations in support of the strike. We realise that not all of this movement can be described as counter-revolutionary, but putting to one side the profound anger workers may feel because of the grave errors which have been committed and the low priority given to their demands, we would be blind if we failed to see the obvious existence of counter-revolutionary demonstrations.'

What Kádár here described as counter-revolutionary were particular demonstrations by reactionary right-wing forces, whose existence was never denied. But a revolution is above all a complex struggle in which various tendencies from one extreme to the other take part. Nevertheless, no-one would use the Vendée revolt to characterise the French revolution or the Cossack revolt to characterise the Russian revolution, leave aside the fact that there was no Cossack revolt in the Hungarian revolution. Nobody, either a Marxist like Kádár or anyone else, would dare to judge a social upheaval on such a trivial basis as a few slogans or insignificant demonstrations, without seriously analysing the real forces in society and their intentions.

No, the real counter-revolution came from the left, and what is more the workers rose against it. Had Kádár wished to oppose a counter-revolution from the right, he would have looked for support from armed workers. Why did he not do so? Why did he more or less directly justify the workers' strike if he didn't call in the same breath for the withdrawal of Soviet troops? It is characteristic that in his reply Kádár tried to explain the Soviet presence but on the other hand avoided mentioning the supposed negotiations for their withdrawal.

On the demands concerning with the security services, Kádár remarked that those responsible for crimes in the past had been removed and that it was therefore out of place to criticise the current services. He said not a word about worker participation in them.

As to its form, Kádár's reply was explicit and conciliating. It even had a polite side, indeed, there was a sense in which he was forced to justify himself to the delegation. But as to the substance, he did not give way on a single point. The delegation waited in vain for any real answer.

Then came the problem of the strike. Kádár used the sort of arguments a capitalist would use, calling on workers to resume work in the interests of the population.

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

‘He asked the members of the delegation to look at the situation more closely. They would realise that prolonging the strike would only bring about inflation and starvation. In his view time was short; in one or two weeks we would be begging for help around the world . . .’

The members of the delegation insisted on discussing Hungary’s international position and raised the problem of neutrality. Kádár’s reply explained not only the *fait accompli* created by the Soviet Union but also the position he personally was in. He said that the point of such a demand lay not in wishes or desires but in the international relationship of forces. That was true, but why not try to shift this relationship of forces a little? Kádár would only say that this problem was not currently up for discussion.

Replying to another question, he stated quite definitely:

‘ . . . that no one would be punished for having taken part in the great popular movement of the last few weeks. He also insisted that an agreement had been reached with the competent Soviet authorities that no one would be deported from Hungary . . .’

At the end of the interview it was clear that Kádár could make no concessions. Indeed, any concession on the government’s part would have increased the prestige of the Central Workers’ Council to the detriment of the government. Politically, therefore, the first confrontation clarified the opposed points but was a goal-less draw.

Nevertheless, an analysis of the demands and Kádár’s response reveals an even more fundamental opposition between two antagonistic conceptions.

As we have seen, the Council was based on a conception of socialism which started off from the workers’ own independent initiative. Kádár’s responses, on the other hand, show a different conception. In his view, the real basis and source of strength of socialism is the apparatus. For Kádár, a system with several socialist parties would lead to the downfall of socialism, whose real future was guaranteed only by the Communist Party’s monopoly of power. It was not the armed workers, but the state security services and army and the Soviet army, also a state body, which could defend the socialist gains.

One can only conclude that it was a conversation between workers and a Stalinist ‘apparatchik’ of the worst stamp, a very self-confident apparatchik, moreover, whose one concern was to neutralise this popular movement. That explains his polite and conciliatory tone. But he judged the strength of this movement to be limited, which is why he stood firm on the substance of the demands.

Discussion on tactics

The next day, 15 November, the Central Workers Council again met in Ujpest at the ‘Egyesült Izzó’ factory. They had to discuss the situation following the negotiations with Kádár and decide what policy to follow. The fact that the meeting with Kádár had been a setback made everybody feel the need to work

out a more effective tactic. It seemed to them that they needed to work out a position which, while taking the given situation into account, sought a compromise with the government.

Bali put forward his proposal that the Central Council should continue to neither recognise nor, despite everything, ignore the Kádár government. He explained that the situation forced them to negotiate with the government since, on paper at least, it was running the country. Thus in Bali's view, the *de jure* non-recognition of the government should not involve *de facto* turning a cold shoulder to it, especially since the general strike could not be kept going *ad infinitum*. The workers had no funds or food reserves, he said, and this would force them back to work, and the strike would collapse.

In any case, Bali explained, the workers' councils could only function if the factories were working and full of workers. Continuing the strike at any price would sooner or later lead to discontent among the workers and would isolate the councils from them. Thus the strike would collapse and the working class would be weakened.

On the other hand, Bali suggested, if the Central Council was to decide to return to work in exchange for concessions wrung out of the government, that would enable it to keep the workers' militancy intact. Moreover, the councils would not become isolated from the workers because they would be in constant contact with them in the factories. He pointed to the really catastrophic situation in the country. He said that Kádár was right on that point; the general strike brought life to a standstill; it wasn't just a policy, but a weapon which was starting to affect the population worse than the government⁵⁰.

The Central Workers' Council thus faced a serious problem. They knew that Kádár's reply was a challenge which put them in a dilemma. The Council did not want to push the struggle all the way, so all they could do was look for a compromise. And this raised a serious question: how to wring such a compromise out of a government which showed no sign of giving way, and how to make sure it was upheld? There was another problem. What rights and opportunities for the working class should be extracted and guaranteed?

Bali's proposal supplied an answer. In his view, what they needed in return for a resumption of work was recognition of the right to strike and the gain of some significant concessions.

The ideology of the movement, or the problem of workers' power

It is not my intention to explain and analyse the entire ideology of the movement. Such an analysis would require a complete history of the workers' councils. For that reason I shall confine myself to raising a few problems to do with power, and the attitude of the Central Council to these problems. Of course I am obliged to analyse only some of them, since the story of the formation of the Central Workers' Council covers only a few of them. Nevertheless it is necessary to consider some aspects of the problem, while at

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

the same time emphasising that a definitive judgement must await a detailed analysis of the whole history of the councils.

Should the Central Workers' Council have considered the seizure of political power, or, on the contrary, should it have developed a struggle to wring concessions from the regime installed after 4 November? This is a question which requires a clear and unequivocal answer.

One could spend a lot of time discussing this theoretical and political problem. I shall try to explain it theoretically first of all, that is, summarise the conceptions of the Central Workers' Council and its member which, it should be noted, were in line with workers' opinions in general.

We have precise knowledge of the views of three important members of the Council. In their accounts, Sebestyén and Töke several times mention the workers' intention of setting up a representative body which could negotiate on their behalf. The delegates, therefore, met with the sole aim of creating such a body, since the workers wanted neither party nor trade union to represent them. What was involved, then, was setting up a centre to coordinate the councils' struggle. As the Central Council resolution of 14 November put it, it had the power 'to negotiate on behalf of workers'. It seems clear to me that the workers had not considered seizing power. Bali's speech shows this very well.

Sebestyén writes, for example:

'A united body was necessary . . . which would represent the whole country and which would be an acceptable negotiating partner both with the Soviet military command and with the Kádár government.'⁵¹

So what was involved was a body to represent the workers against the Kádár government, to push it back and make it accept their demands. In short, it was envisaged as an opposition body.

But I must agree, theoretically at least, with Edvard Kardelj who, speaking to the Yugoslav national assembly about the Hungarian revolution, stated:

' . . . It was characteristic that the the working masses took up a position of support for the unity of the workers' councils at a higher level with the aim of directly influencing the central power of the state. This itself proves that, despite the ideological chaos it was in, the Hungarian working class found the right road leading to power. . .'⁵²

I should like to emphasise two important points here. First of all, a political opposition in itself is never static. In other words, it always tends to pass over to the attack against the political authorities, irrespective of the views of its leaders. The nature of political struggle forces any opposition movement whatsoever sooner or later to go over to the offensive against those in power. It is impossible to discuss such a body without considering the possibility of seizing power.

So there was a contradiction here. The workers did not want to take power and their Central Council said as much, but in practice they did everything they could to achieve it, first and foremost organising a political opposition that was both powerful and dynamic. This contradiction marked the setting up of the Central Workers' Council, but the way it developed was to become one of the

most interesting problems of the history of the Greater Budapest Central Workers' Council. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it is more complicated than Kardelj seems to think in his, in my view, too hasty judgement.

However, one thing does need analysing. Why did Hungarian workers and the members of the Central Workers' Council not want to conquer political power once the Council had been set up?

In his speech, for example, Bali emphasised that the councils were factory bodies and argued that the Central Council, like the councils in general, could only be strong if the workers were in the factories and thus in direct touch with their councils. He apparently did not have in mind the transformation of this relationship into a *territorial* one. Of course, in that case the councils would have become territorial bodies less and less firmly attached to the factories. Bali did not exclude territorial councils, but he saw them as a gathering of *factory* delegates. For him, the factory and not the territory was the basis. It follows logically that in his view the councils were not essentially political organs of the working class. Their role was only provisional.

The reasons why they did not want to take power were of a theoretical and political nature. According to Bali's theoretical position it was impossible to expect the councils to take power. Bali himself later explained his hostility towards taking power. During talks with the government on 25 November, he said:

'The Hungarian working class developed these Workers' Councils quite spontaneously . . . We are well aware that they cannot be political organisations. We are fully aware of the need for a political party and a trade union. But in view of the fact that for the time being we have no practical opportunity to set up such organisations we are compelled to concentrate all our forces . . . We should not and we cannot talk about trade unions unless and until Hungarian workers have built up the unions from below and delegated to them our right to strike . . . We know that the Workers' Councils will become organs directing the country's economy. *We do not want to commit the same mistake as the Party did in the past, namely, when it was, at the same time, masters both of the country and of the factories and also the organisation which represented the interests of the workers. If we commit this mistake, we shall again be where we were in the past.* We want the Workers' Councils to direct the country's economic affairs, and the trade unions to have the right to strike and manage all affairs relating to the protection of workers' interests.'⁵³

Bali and the other members of the Central Workers' Council saw three kinds of working-class organisation. First of all the councils, running the country's economic life, then the trade union, defending and representing the interests of the workers, and finally the -- socialist -- political parties. They had no problems with this, since all these organisations had a well-justified place in society and workers' lives. In the paragraph I have emphasised, Bali explained

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

the deep-seated reason why he and his comrades wanted to distribute power in this way. They did not want to repeat under another name the terrible experiences arising from the extreme concentration of power in the hands of one single body, the Communist Party. Whether the concrete form in which Bali and the others proposed to distribute or decentralise power was good or bad, realisable or not, is another question. But it is beyond doubt that the deep-seated idea behind this proposal is justified by the experience of the people's democracies. I think it is a good idea and the only one that can take the socialist workers' movement forward in the right direction.

Although Bali raised this conception, he recognised that 'for the moment' the councils were the only organisations of the working class. He said: 'we are compelled to concentrate all our forces' (the political and trade-union forces of the working class -- BN) in one place, in this instance, the councils. He understood that the councils also played the role of a political party. Theoretically he did not want to set the councils up in power. In practice, however, he recognised that they had to take on a political role. So why did he not contemplate the seizure of power and the establishment of a system in line with his ideas?

Because there were also some political considerations.

I spoke earlier about Hungary's delicate international position, which had been emphasised all too clearly by the Soviet intervention. The Soviet Union arbitrarily installed Kádár in power. Consequently any attempt to conquer power would have to confront the Soviet Union. An assault on Kádár's power would have meant a Soviet counter-attack. It should be thought through. Such a policy would have meant continuing and building up the armed resistance to the Soviet army.

Of course some intellectuals proposed direct negotiations with the Russians, imagining that the Soviet Union would realise that the Kádár government was in an untenable position and would perhaps grant certain concessions, and even a measure of power, to the Central Workers' Council.

But the Council realised, first, that overthrowing the government would inevitably bring about an armed struggle, which was impossible after 4 November, and second, that the Kádár government, installed by the Russians, would remain in place whatever contacts there were between the Council and the Soviet Union. That meant that in making contact with the Soviets the Central Council would have to deal with Kádár. Only one possibility remained, therefore: forcing a compromise. And that meant a policy of opposition.

I should repeat here that it is impossible to decide between this policy and that proposed by the intellectuals without knowing the entire history of the councils. Suffice it to say that, besides their theoretical position, it was these political considerations which determined the Central Workers' Council choice of the role of opposition.

Finally, I should remind the reader of the workers' fundamental political principle which itself also prevented the Central Workers' Council from pursuing a policy aimed at the conquest of power. This was the ever-present

democratism which did not permit the workers to represent peasants and intellectuals without a mandate. It was one thing, as the Central Workers' Council later did, to extend its representivity and its system of alliances to the point where it could speak and act on behalf of the whole people. But it was another to assume such representivity *at the outset*. Only a complete history of the Central Workers' Council from the outset would be adequate to provide a reply to all these problems which arose even then.

Political decisions of the Central Workers' Council

The members of the Council could not know what course future events would take, but they had to adopt positions on these problems. The setback in the first negotiations with Kádár and the rapid development of the movement faced them with this fundamental choice. Bali had explained what his position was and it had been adopted by all the delegates.

The opinions he expressed were shared by the others, and that fact should be born in mind. The Council members were of the view that the government's rejection made necessary a policy of compromise on the workers' part, since it was unthinkable that the government would give way, for example, on the demand for a Nagy government. On the other hand, the Council members said, the compromise should be on an acceptable basis, and this meant the Council had to show its strength.

The Central Workers' Council, then, decided to resume negotiations with Kádár and to offer a return to work on 19 November on condition he guaranteed to negotiate with the Russians with a view to getting them to withdraw their troops and allow Imre Nagy to join the government.

In the course of this discussion, several Council members drew attention to the absolutely unpopular nature of a return to work. They thought it would be a severe test of the relationship between the Council and the embittered workers, but they were confident. It seemed to them the best policy since, if the workers accepted the return to work, they would obey any future strike call from the Central Council.

There was a debate about where the Central Workers' Council should be based. The Egysült Izzó factory was too far from town and the other working-class districts, so the Council decided to move its headquarters into the town. József Babai proposed the Akácfa (Acacia) Street buildings of his own firm, the Tramway Company. His proposal was accepted.

Published the next day, these became known as the 16 November decisions. And so the Greater Budapest Central Workers' Council became the definitive body of the Budapest working class.

Final considerations

I chose the title of this section on purpose. The reader must have noticed that I have abstained from formulating fixed and definitive judgements on a number of important problems. This was because I thought it necessary to

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

know and summarise the entire history of the councils in Hungary in order to draw valid conclusions. The story of how the Central Council was set up is not enough to draw such conclusions. It would be premature to project onto it my views which, in any case, would not flow from the available facts.

On the other hand, knowledge of how the Central Workers' Council was set up does permit certain valid and definitive considerations to be brought out.

The first is that the Hungarian revolution has to be divided into two major phases. The first started on 23 October 1956 and lasted until 4 November. Despite everything, the Soviet intervention did not mark its end, but nevertheless a new phase opened on 4 November. The great event of this phase was the setting up of the Central Workers' Council, and its history is to a great extent that of the Council. I say to a great extent, because there were other events and other movements which I cannot relate within the framework of this relatively short study.

The second consideration to emerge as a conclusion from these pages is that the Kádár government was a counter-revolutionary power installed by a foreign army with the sole aim of crushing the forces of the revolution and liquidating its gains. It is clear that these forces of revolution, above all the workers' councils, represented the people, while the government reinforced a centralist, bureaucratic and anti-democratic power.

Finally, in connection with the Central Workers' Council, we can state that the working class was quite capable of setting it up in a very short space of time. Nevertheless, its establishment was not automatic, it was a process which lasted from 12 to 15 November, from the first, bigger, assemblies to the determination of its political line.

This process was determined by the experiences the workers acquired progressively, i.e. without any preconceived ideas. That means that the Central Workers' Council was a natural product of the revolutionary workers' movement against the communist system in a people's democracy.

While affirming that the Council was a product of the working class, we should not forget that the presence of socialist intellectuals was, to a certain extent, inevitable and at the same time necessary for its establishment.

We have seen that the Budapest workers were able, in the most unfavourable circumstances, to set up their own body against the left-wing reactionaries and their backers. How were they able to carry out the struggle? What experiences did they make in doing so? A complete history of the Central Workers' Council and the councils in general will be needed to answer these questions.

Footnotes

¹ Some data about industry and the working class is needed to understand the workers' movement. More than half of Hungary's industry is concentrated in Budapest. It lies in the suburbs which surround the capital. The three big industrial centres are in the north in the 9th (Ujpest) and 13th districts, in the south in the 11th and 21st districts (Csepel), and in the south east, in the 10th, 18th, 19th and 20th districts. Most of the engineering industry (employing 119,000 workers) is located in Budapest. The capital is the centre for the production of the means of transport (electric and diesel-electric locomotives, rolling stock, boatbuilding, etc.). This is in the hands of the Ganz-Mávag complex. At the same time Budapest is the centre of machine-tool production (the 'Láng' and 'Magyar Acél' factories, etc.). It is also the second largest centre of metal production (Csepel, 21st district), not to mention light industry (60 per cent of the textile industry is located in Budapest, for example). The capital is the country's largest steelmaking centre (Csepel). (Cf. Dr. Pécsi, Márton-Sárfalvi, Béla, *Magyarország földrajza* (Geography of Hungary), Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó (Academy Publications), 1960, p.327)

During the revolution, the workers in the biggest metallurgical, machine-tool and electrical-appliance factories were the most militant (for example Csepel, the machine-tool factories in the 13th district: 'Láng' and 'Magyar Acél' factories, etc., and the electrical-appliance and optical works: 'Beloianis', 'Egyesült Izzó', 'Gamma' and 'Magyar Optikai Művek'.) These factories, and those in Ujpest employed between 200 and 250 thousand workers in the latter part of the 1950's, for which period all these figures apply.

² A nemzet egységes akarata. Rőlap. (The Unanimous Will of the Nation. Leaflet). Documents of the Central Workers Council. This leaflet was published after the 4 November, but is undated.

³ Documents of the workers' councils.

⁴ *A magyar forradalom és szabadságharc. A hazai rádióadások tükrében. 1956 október 23 - november 9.* (The Hungarian revolution and the Fight for Independence seen through Hungarian radio broadcasts 23 October - 9 November 1956). New York, Free Europe Press, undated, pages 255 and 281.

⁵ *Budapest Statisztikai Zsebkönyve, 1957.* (Budapest Statistical Handbook, 1957.) *Fontosabb adatok az 1956 október-decemberi időszakról* (Important Statistical Data for the Period October-December 1956), Budapest, Központi Statisztikai Hivatal (Central Statistical Bureau), 15 January 1957, p. 81.

⁶ *Hungaricus. Quelques enseignements de la révolution démocratique et nationale hongroise.* Documents I, Brussels, published by the Institute Imre Nagy de Sciences Politiques, 1959, p.6.

⁷ *Népszabadság* (central organ of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (Communist party), November-December 1956, January 1957.

How the Budapest Central Workers Council was set up

Népakarat (central organ of the Hungarian trade unions), November-December 1956, January 1957.

Magyar Közlöny (official gazette), 1957.

La Documentation Française. Notes et Etudes Documentaires. Paris, 1958. Nos 2393, 2395, 2400.

⁸ *L'insurrection hongroise*. Paris, published by 'Socialisme ou Barbarie', 1956, p.3.

⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, 14 November 1956.

¹⁰ Quoted in *La Documentation Française*, op cit . My emphasis - BN.

¹¹ Eye-witness accounts. Documents of the Central Workers' Council.

¹² Quoted by François Bondy in his Epilogue to Lasky, Melvin J. (ed.) *The Hungarian Revolution. The Story of the October Uprising as Recorded in Documents, Dispatches, Eye-Witness Accounts and World-Wide Reactions. A White Book*. published for the Congress for Cultural Freedom by Frederick A. Prager, New York 1957, p.302.

¹³ *Rapport sur la Hongrie par la Délégation de la Fédération Syndicale Mondiale*, London, W.F.T.V. Publications Ltd., undated, p.33 (my emphasis - BN).

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.34.

¹⁵ *Magyar Közlöny*, 12 November 1956.

¹⁶ First Order of the Soviet Command to the people of Budapest. Leaflet, Budapest, 6 November 1956 [Archives of the Imre Nagy Institute, R. XVII/2. Published in English in *Report of the Special Committee on Hungary*. New York, United Nations, 1957, Vol II, p. 110]

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ *Napló*, 16 December 1956. Quoted in 'Négy nap szabadság', Brüsszel, Szabad Szakszervezetek Nemzetközi Szövetsége ('Four Days of Freedom', Brussels, World Federation of Free Trade Unions), 1958, p.225

²⁰ Resolutions of the councils of the 11th district. Budapest, 12 November 1956. (Documents of the workers' councils.)

²¹ *Népszabadság*, 14 November 1956. (For a French version, see: *La Documentation Française*, op. cit., no. 2396, 25 March 1958.)

²² István Bibó is one of the great Hungarian political thinkers and theoreticians of the last quarter of a century. He was one of the representatives of the so-called populist movement which sprang up in the thirties and tried to find a possible solution between western-style democracy and communist-style dictatorship of the proletariat. This movement had a big impact on young intellectuals and was a threat to the Stalinists. As the leading Stalinist Révai said: 'Unlike the Russian Narodniks, the main problem with them' (the populists - BN) 'is not the contrast between their brand of socialism and that of the Marxists. They are conscious of this contrast but they live with it. In other words they accept proletarian socialism as a given, but they do not believe that the future, and in particular the future of socialism, belongs to it.' This tendency is generally called the 'third road' and was based on the poor peasants forming an alliance with the workers' movement. After 1945 Bibó, as an official in the

new democratic state, opposed both the manoeuvres of the communists and the reactionary tendencies and put forward a true popular-style democracy. The communists pushed him aside and he published nothing after 1949. He became a professor of sociology and political science, but he was even thrown out of the university. During the 1956 revolution he became one of the leaders of the Petöfi Party and a minister of state in the Nagy government. After 4 November he worked out his political scheme and later a Memorandum in which he summed up the political significance of the Hungarian revolution. On 27 May 1957 the Hungarian police arrested him and condemned him to indefinite imprisonment. Since then he has been in prison.

[Szabó, Zoltán. Bevezetés. Bibó, István. *Harmadik út. Politikai és történelmi tanulmányok.* (Szabó, Zoltán. Introduction. Bibó, István. Third Road. Political and historical studies.) London, Magyar Könyves Céh, 1960, p.380]

²³ Miklós Gimes was executed with Imre Nagy, Pál Maleter and József Szilágyi on 17 June 1958.

²⁴ In 1950, local government was re-organised in line with the Soviet model. The local town halls in Budapest and elsewhere were turned into ‘councils’. This was no more than a change of name. So when the former councils are mentioned, they are not revolutionary councils but these so-called ‘councils’.

²⁵ It should be pointed out that the 13th district, a working-class industrial area, and the neighbouring 14th district (Ujpest) make up the second biggest working-class industrial locality in Budapest after Csepel.

²⁶ There were many such negotiations between revolutionary forces and the Soviet army. Here is one of them: ‘The Revolutionary Councils of Counties Borsod, Szatmar, and Szabolcs’ (in the north-east of the country - BN) ‘have come to an agreement with the Soviet Military Command on a cease-fire and mutual troop withdrawal in a radius of three to four kilometers’ (Radio Free Miskolc, 4 November 1956, quoted in Lansky, op. cit. p.239.

²⁷ Eye-witness accounts, documents of the Central Workers’ Council. It can now be revealed that this intellectual was Nicolas Krasso, who later fled to Britain. This was not mentioned in the original edition of this pamphlet in 1960-1961 for security reasons.

²⁸ Documents of the Central Workers’ Council.

²⁹ Testimony of Miklós Sebestyén, a member of the Central Workers’ Council. Documents of the Central Workers’ Council. Published (in part) in *Etudes*, 3. année, no. 2, 1961.

³⁰ Ibid. R. IV/12

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ When a large part of Sebestyén’s testimony was published in the *Etudes* (op. cit.) the editors wrote that ‘. . . the exact date when the Central Council was set up is (given) differently in different accounts. Ferenc Töke, for example, talks in detail about the meeting which set it up, but gives the date as 14 November.

(Cf. Töke, 'What the Hungarian Workers' Councils Were', *Etudes* No 3, January 1960.) Since then several conversations with eye-witnesses have proved beyond doubt that the 13 November meeting took place but that Töke was not there, so that he could not have reported about it.

³⁴ Details of the delegation and its demands are pieced together from Ferenc Töke's testimony. (Testimony. Documents of the Central Workers' Council.)

³⁵ Ibid. Author's emphasis.

³⁶ According to information obtained from Miklós Sebestyén, a member of the Central Workers' Council.

³⁷ Once it had siezed power, the Communist Party quickly transformed not only the economic and cultural life of the country but also its administration. To carry out this transformation and the work of 'socialist construction', it relied upon a whole new leading elite recruited among workers. But despite its working-class composition, this elite became a privileged stratum totally separated from the workers and a docile tool of the Communist Party. (Cf. Milovan Djilas. *The New Ruling Class*.)

³⁹ What is said in the following chapters about attendance at the meeting and what happened there has been pieced together from eye-witness accounts. (Documents of the Central Workers' Council.)

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ A Nagy Budapesti Központi Munkástanács felhívása valamennyi üzemi, kerületi és megyei munkástanácshoz. 1956 november 27. (Call of the Greater Budapest Central Workers' Council to all factory and district workers' councils in the capital and the provinces. 27 November 1956.) Published in *Etudes*, No. 4, 1960.

⁴² Based on information from Miklós Sebestyén.

⁴³ I only quote this as an example. This study of the formation of the Central Workers' Council does not seek to tell its whole history.

⁴⁴ Testimony. Documents of the Central Workers' Council

⁴⁵ The original is quoted in full in 'The Workers' Councils in Hungary' by Miklós Sebestyén, in 'Workers' Participation in Management. An International Seminar Under the Auspices of the Congress for Cultural Freedom' (roneotype)

⁴⁶ Quoted by Király, Ernő, *Die Arbeiterselbstverwaltung in Ungarn. Aufstieg und Untergang, 1956 - 1958*, München, Südost-Institut, 1961, p.111.

⁴⁷ There is contradictory information about the numbers on this delegation. In his testimony, Ferenc Töke says it had six members, while Miklós Sebestyén clearly remembers quite a large number, at least 12. The 15 November issue of *Népszabadság* mentioned a delegation of 19.

⁴⁸ Call of the Central Workers' Council . . . See note 41

⁴⁹ Eye-witness accounts. Documents of the Central Workers' Council.

Népszabadság 15 November 1956. There is also material in Lasky, op. cit. and

Footnotes

Report of the Special Committee on Hungary. United Nations. Vol. II pp 133 - 134.

⁵⁰ Eye-witness accounts. Documents of the Central Worker's Council.

⁵¹ *The Workers' Councils in Hungary*, Miklos Sebestyén. Op. cit.

⁵² Ibid. (Quoted by Sebestyén.)

⁵³ Quoted in F.Bondy, Epilogue, Lasky. Op. cit. p. 295.