

**F**ORTY years ago this month the Hungarian working class was waging a life or death struggle for socialist democracy. From the capital, Budapest, to the smallest village, workers and students, often armed with little more than petrol bombs, were desperately resisting the invasion of thousands of Russian tanks. It was in the industrial areas that the fighting was fiercest. At the end of four days, Dunapentele and Czepele — called “Red Czepele” because it had such a high proportion of Communist Party members — had been pounded into ruins.

Hungary was occupied by the Russian army at the end of World War 2. By 1948 it had a fully-established Stalinist regime. The Security Police, the AVH, had constructed a pervasive spy network. The so-called trade unions policed the draconian labour laws introduced in 1950. Those found guilty of even minor crimes were given long sentences in labour camps.

The Hungarian economy became a milch-cow for Russia. In 1948, finance minister Erno Gero announced that 25% of national expenditure was going to pay Russian war “reparations”. These were also the years of the “personality cult” of Stalin and of his Hungarian counterpart, Rakosi. It is recorded that Rakosi admonished a Central Committee member for describing a Party decision as “wise”. That term, he pointed out, was reserved for himself! Between 1948 and 1950 almost half a million Party members were purged, and a large number paid for even the mildest criticism with their lives.

In 1949, the veteran Party leader Laszlo Rajk was hanged after he had “confessed” in a show trial to being a secret “Tito-Trotsky-Fascist”. In Hungary, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, Stalinist leaders who had been exiled in Moscow were used as a battering ram against the “indigenous” Party leaders from the wartime underground, as Stalin ensured complete control.

**W**HEN Stalin died in 1953, the East European workers began to move. There were mass demonstrations in Czechoslovakia, and two weeks later the workers of East Germany rebelled. Although the German revolt was crushed by Russian tanks, it led the Kremlin to ease up. After Khrushchev publicly condemned Stalin in 1956, new upheavals began, in Poland.

On the morning of 28 June 1956, the workers of the Zispo Locomotive Factory



# Workers Stalinist

**Kate Buckell** tells the story of 1

in Poznan, Poland, struck. An elected committee presented management with demands on pay and conditions. Workers from other plants joined the strike, and the demands soon became political: “Out with the Russians!”, “Freedom and Bread!”

Russian tanks surrounded the city, and Polish troops crushed the strike, but the bureaucrats had been shaken. “Disgraced” Stalinist liberalisers like Gomulka were brought back into the leadership. When the Poznan workers came to trial in September, the sentences were relatively mild. Further trials were abandoned. In October, Khrushchev suddenly arrived in Poland,

backed up by large-scale troop manoeuvres on the border. Armed groups of workers appeared on the streets. Khrushchev got no more from the liberalising Polish leadership than a routine declaration of Polish-USSR friendship. For the first time a satellite regime had refused to toe the Moscow line.

This gave confidence to critical voices in Hungary. The government agreed to rebury Rajk, and 200,000 followed his coffin on 6 October. The Petofi Circle, a group of young reform-minded Communist Party members, called for a demonstration of solidarity with Poland. The government

**“The Hungarian revolution created a system of workers’ councils**



broadcast, denouncing them as "fascist rabble". A delegation went into the Parliament building to see the Party leaders. After an hour it had not returned, and people grew restive. Almost jovially, the huge bronze statue of Stalin was toppled. The AVH fired on the crowd, killing several people; street-fighting broke out and continued throughout the night. The rebels seized public buildings. By morning, with Budapest under rebel control, a desperate bureaucracy installed Nagy as prime minister. Later that day, martial law was declared, and an announcement made that Russian troops had been called in.

**T**HROUGHOUT September, unrest had been growing in the industrial areas as the news from Poland filtered through. Copies of the critical intellectuals' *Literary Gazette* had found their way onto the shop floor. The first demands of the workers were for genuine trade union democracy and workers' control. Initially the Party tried to fob them off with promises. Now the workers seized control themselves.

On the evening of 23 October, the workers of Czepe Island struck. Armaments workers distributed guns around the factories. By the next morning, the strike was general throughout Budapest, and each factory had elected a workers' council. Within the day, they had linked up to form a Revolutionary Council, whose authority was accepted by virtually the whole population of the city.

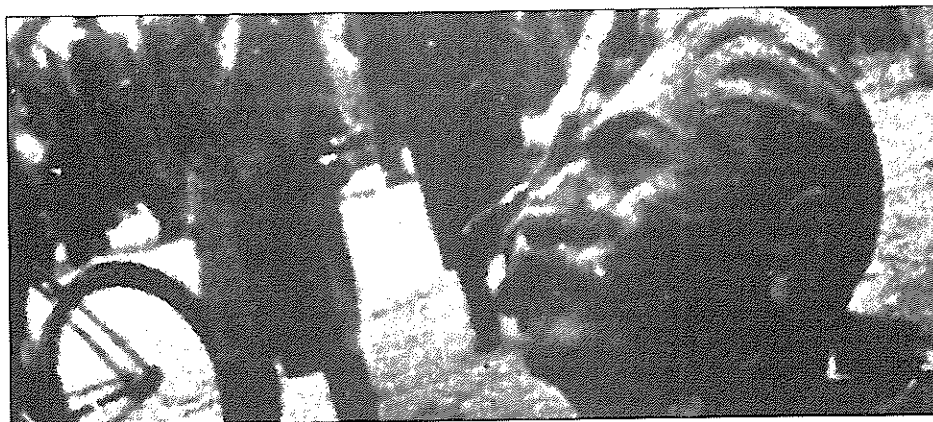
The same happened in other towns: the workers of a factory would strike and elect a council. The factory representatives would come together, seize the radio station, disarm the AVH, and begin the distribution of food and supplies. By the end of Wednesday 24th, effective power lay in the hands of the workers' councils throughout the country.

# against tanks

## the Hungarian Revolution of 1956

permitted the demonstration, and then, on 22 October, the day before the march was due to happen, they banned it. 100,000 marched despite the ban, and a resolution was read out from the Writers' Union which called for the removal of the Rakosi clique, the formation of a new government including the reformer Imre Nagy (who had been expelled from the Party in mid-1955), free elections, control of the factories by workers and specialists, and equal social and economic relations between Hungary and Russia.

As the crowd moved on to the Parliament building, the Stalinist leader Gero



and counterposed it to both capitalism and the Stalinist system."

The next step, of linking the councils together, was never completed. However, in the lull between the first and second Russian interventions, regional links were made. On 29 October a widely representative meeting was held in Gyor. The programme of the workers' councils was never fully proclaimed. It was often confused or partial, and expressed undue confidence in people like Nagy. But everywhere three demands came through clearly:

- That the workers should control, economically and politically;
- That the corrupt Stalinist bureaucracy be overthrown;
- That small nations like Hungary have the right to self-determination.

**C**AUGHT between the Russians and the workers' councils was the Nagy government. Both workers and intellectuals had welcomed Nagy's appointment as prime minister; the bureaucrats, however, saw Nagy as a liberal figurehead who might quell the rebellion by his reputation and sweet promises. Nagy tried to serve both the Russian bureaucracy and the workers, and ended up satisfying neither. On 30 October he announced that the Russians had agreed to withdraw. Within

two days, it was clear that he had been deceived. The Russians had had to withdraw the troops used in the first assault because they were "infected" by the spirit of those they were fighting and had become "unreliable", but they brought in fresh troops for the showdown. For a week, from 4 November, all-out battle raged, until in the end the insurgent workers were crushed by overwhelming military might. Nagy took refuge in the Yugoslav Embassy, left on an assurance of safe conduct, and was arrested and then shot in 1958.

33 years after 1956, the Stalinist regime finally fell; and it was as if history were an adult revisiting a place it had remembered from childhood as grand and awe-inspiring, and finding it petty and dull. In October 1989, after a year or so of accelerating liberalisation, the Communist Party voted itself and its one-party regime out of existence. The consequence has been neither the workers' commonwealth which socialists had hoped for in 1956, nor the fascist horror which Stalinists had claimed to be the only alternative to the Russian tanks. By mid-1995 the old staid economy had been decisively dismantled, with 75% of the large state-owned enterprises either shut or

privatised. Hungary today is a tawdry, market-capitalist system, with increased inequality and poverty but also enrichment for a large minority. It has attracted more Western investment than the other East European states. There is parliamentary democracy. Socialists can at last argue their views freely, but for now no-one much listens. Independent trade unions can organise, but they are feeble.

The difference between 1956 and 1989 was 33 years of evolution. After securing himself in power, Janos Kadar, the man put in by the Russians to replace Nagy, tried to guard against new explosions by riding society with looser reins than the old high-Stalinist regime. This "goulash communism", with increasing ties of trade and debt to the West from the 1970s, gradually transmuted the Stalinist bureaucracy, formed as an instrument of terrorist rule and forced-march industrialisation, into a sprawling, time-serving officialdom. A sizeable reform-minded middle-class grew up.

The working class was less terrorised and beaten down — but also more atomised. Its life became more and more dominated by the battle to survive and prosper in black and grey markets of many shades. Its political consciousness was eroded not only by the way the bureaucracy clogged up all channels of education and information with its lacklustre jargon, but also, especially in the 1980s, by the failure of the West European workers' movement to offer hope for a real alternative both to capitalism and Stalinism.

At the end of this evolution, reformists in the bureaucracy were able to trash the old framework, and win the workers' support for doing so, without great risk. Opinion surveys showed that workers wanted a social-democratic, welfare-state society; the facts show that they have, reluctantly and for now, accepted market capitalism, with very little welfare provision, as the only "actually existing" alternative to Stalinism.

Yet the precondition for the more-or-less peaceful collapse of the European Stalinist states was the sharp, nerve-breaking, confidence-shattering revolutionary blows delivered to the bureaucracies by the Hungarian workers in 1956, the Czech and Slovak workers in 1968, and the Polish workers in 1980-1. Those workers' revolts represented the radical, clear-cut alternative to Stalinism. What we have seen so far is only a pale refraction, a half-way house.

## How we might have won

**B**EFORE the Hungarian uprising of 1956, there had been many revolts against bureaucratic rule. In 1953 there were the strikes and uprisings in East Germany. In 1956 there was the uprising in Poznan, in Poland. None of those, however, had reached the stage of creating an alternative power structure. In Hungary, the combination of internal Communist Party leadership struggles around de-Stalinisation, an intense Hungarian national sense of grievance against Russian overlordship, and direct action by the working class, led to a movement which did create the outline of an alternative system of working-class self-rule.

The Hungarian revolution created a specifically working-class system of workers' councils, and counterposed it to both capitalism and the Stalinist bureaucratic system. They were defeated and crushed by the Stalinist Russian army, as had been the Paris workers of 1871 by the army of Versailles. But in the Central Workers' Council of Budapest they recreated the classic form of work-

ing-class democracy, the lineal continuation of the Paris Commune, of the Russian Soviets in the pre-Stalinist era, and, to an extent, of the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919. Replicating the Russian Soviets of 1917, they showed that those were no accident or aberration.

A revolutionary organisation which had a clear programme and trained cadres involved with the mass action might very well have changed the course of events in 1956. No such thing was possible. The Stalinist rulers, before and after 1956, were fanatically diligent in repressing revolutionary socialist activity. That was one determinant of what happened in 1989 and after: the Stalinists had done too thorough a job of wiping out independent working-class politics for revolutionary socialism to be a factor in resolving the crisis when Stalinism began to collapse. The great task now in Eastern Europe and the ex-USSR is to recreate a socialist working-class movement, untainted by Stalinism.