

November 1989

The Working Class Trapped
Under the Velvet Tricolour

kolektivně proti kapitálu

NOVEMBER 1989:

**The Working Class Trapped
Under the Velvet Tricolour**

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Obsah

<i>Foreword to the English edition</i>	5
<i>Introduction</i>	5
<i>I. Chronology</i>	8
<i>II. A change along the course of history</i>	14
<i>III. Handing over of power: the anatomy</i>	19
OF and the students: the vanguard and its “brutal force” on a leash.....	19
The Stalinist apparatus: power of the powerless.....	25
The working class: Captive in the Stalinist experience and the concept of citizenship.....	28
- The center of November 1989 was outside the workplaces.....	28
- The dead echo of 1968.....	32
- Two sides of the same coin: the Stalinist hyperpoliti- cization and the dissidents’ “apolitical politics”.....	36
- Change as a peaceful process: from dialogue to power.....	37
- The “end of politics” as a smokescreen.....	39
<i>IV. By way of conclusion</i>	43
Sources and acknowledgements.....	45

Foreword to the English edition

The present text was originally published in Czech in autumn 2009. We have kept the main text intact for this English edition. It was only extended by a few footnotes, as well as by notes of the Prague center of strike committees about the participation in the general strike in December 1989, which were not available when the text was originally published.

We have pointed out some of the limits of this text in the foreword to the Czech edition. Three years later, we would like to once more emphasize those words. The present text is a mere introduction into the topic, it often resorts to shortcuts, and would benefit from more context. Nevertheless, we believe it fulfills its purpose – it sketches the events of November 1989 from the point of view of workers' autonomy.

In the original foreword, we refer to a planned text on the economic nature of “really existing socialism”. Even though we have taken steps toward such a text, it has not seen the light of day yet. The question of crisis soon became more important to the working class, and our focus had to shift correspondingly.

Kolektivně proti kapitálu (Collectively Against Capital), October 2012

Introduction

November 1989 is one of the topics that the “radical left” in Czech Republic and Slovakia tends to avoid, rather than analyze it and put it into a wider political framework.

There have been several reasons for this.

Most people associated with the “radical left” are too young to use a critical engagement with the events of November 1989 to settle accounts with their own past and their own involvement in the “Velvet Revolution”.

Moreover, the topic is closely connected with a difficult question: What was the nature of the system that ruled Czechoslovakia and all of Eastern Europe before 1989? The blunt answer of historians, journalists and ideologues from KSČM¹ to TOP 09,² according to which it was socialism, can be thrown out of the window right away, but what is next? Trotskyist groups offered their own answer by repeating the wrong manuals of their foreign maternal organizations (even without attempting

¹ KSČM (the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia) was founded in 1990. Along with the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS), it was part of the federal Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČS) which before, since 1921, had used the acronym KSČ. After the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the parties parted ways.

² The name of the right-wing party TOP 09 is an acronym for “Tradition”, “Responsibility”, “Prosperity” and the year 2009 when it was founded. It is an outspoken advocate for capitalist interests and an initiator of anti-workers measures.

to base them on concrete facts about pre-November Czechoslovakia), while anarchists resorted to vague condemnations which were not based on an analysis of categories like value or commodity and settled for moralist complaints about the undemocratic character of the regime and lack of freedom.

But most importantly: For sound reasons, the “system” which existed in Czechoslovakia before 1989 was rejected, just as the one that came after November. Why should we, then, waste attention for the events of November, which took us out of the frying pan right into the fire?

In our opinion, however, it is worth returning to November 1989.

It was, after all, a change which set up the *contemporary* living conditions of the proletariat³ and the functioning of capital in the Czech Republic and Slovakia – and not only there, for it was a part of the collapse of the whole Eastern bloc, the impact of which has been global. The terrain on which capital is contested by the proletariat today was demarcated in a process of which November was an important part.

Our interest in November 1989 is not neutral, quite the contrary, we look at it from an involved standpoint.

The goal is, primarily, to understand how the post-November ruling class managed to organize social change and its own rise so elegantly and confidently. What was missing on the part of the working class, which made the fall of Stalinism end the way it ended? It did, after all, release the dynamics of society, it did open up a space which up to then had been monopolized by the state and the Party! The demolishing of the old is always a fragile and potentially open and uncertain situation, is it not?

Why then, did the working class gain so little from the events of November? Why did the people of our class, who did not take it to the streets of November because they wanted a comeback of Western-style capitalism, and whom Václav Havel⁴

³ When we speak of „the proletariat“, „workers“ or the „working class“, we do not mean only the manual workers in factories, but also wage laborers taking part in social production in offices, warehouses, supermarket chains, post offices, hospitals... On the question of class, see our Czech text, *Notes on Class (A-Kontra, 03/2007)* (<http://protikapitalu.org/?p=31>).

⁴ Václav Havel was a playwright and dissident, an eminent signatory of Charter 77 (see note 9). Before 1989 he spent about five years in jail. In November 1989 he was the main protagonist of political change, later becoming the Czechoslovak and then the Czech President.

⁵ These assurances reached a most concentrated form in the speeches of Václav Havel:

“For twenty years, the official propaganda kept repeating that I am an enemy of socialism, that I want to restore capitalism, that I am in the service of imperialism which provides me with fat rewards, that I want to become an owner of various enterprises... Those were all lies (...)” (December 1989, before the presidential election)

“For me, the decisive matter is not what we call these social guarantees, but what they are. I believe that they should be far greater than those provided by the system that many call socialism.” (December 1989)

“We want a republic that will take great care of eliminating all the degrading barriers between different social strata; a republic in which we shall not be divided to slaves and masters. I ache for such a republic more than anyone else.” (January 23 1990, Parliament)

had to reassure that “there won’t be unemployment”,⁵ become such an easy victim of “tightening the belts” only shortly afterwards? Why did members of the working class who were present at those few mass demonstrations at the squares and thought that a better future is being *created* there, find themselves so *demobilized* in the Nineties?

Neither historians nor sociologists are seeking answers to such questions. The following pages present our own attempt at those answers, but they have to be preceded by two notes on the limitations of our text.

First of all, we abstract from the global and wider historical context, and because of the difficulties posed by the topic, we will limit ourselves to the *process of handing over political power itself* in November/December 1989 (and, moreover, only to the events in the Czech part of Czechoslovakia; some justification for this is the fact that for the changes in the power centre (Central Committee of the KSČ and the government of the ČSSR⁶), the role played by the Občanské fórum (Civic Forum, referred to as OF below) and the events in Prague were more important than the role of Verejnosť proti násiliu (Public Against Violence, VPN) and the events in Bratislava.)

Second, November 1989 is for us a unity of two moments: of continuity and discontinuity. From the economic point of view, we can speak of *continuity* not only because labor power was being exploited before November as well as afterwards, but also because tendencies towards a (wary) change in the direction which could be brought to its radical end only by the transformation after 1989 were developing already in the framework of pre-November (state-) capitalism.⁷ We will devote a future text to the economic nature of the ČSSR; for now, we will concentrate on November as a moment of *discontinuity*, a profound change in the political form of commodity-producing society in Czechoslovakia, which led to establishment of a *modern capitalist democracy with a working civil society*.

We hope that in spite of these limits, our text will not only contribute to an understanding of what happened in November 1989, but will also perhaps help us in finding a “lens” through which we can look at the class reality and struggles of today and also at the preparation of a revolutionary change we are seeking.

⁶ KSČ (Komunistická strana Československa) was the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. ČSSR (Československá socialistická republika, Czechoslovak Socialist Republic) was the official name of the country from 1960 to early 1990). Below we will refer to both by the acronyms, i.e. KSČ and ČSSR.

⁷ Thanks to certain conceptions that were developed under Stalinism, before November 1989, “it wasn’t necessary to start from zero [after November]”. (Jiří Jonáš: *Economic Transformation in the Czech Republic. Macroeconomic development and economic policy*)

I. Chronology ▶▶▶▶▶

▶▶▶▶▶ On **November 17th**, about 25 000 people (fifty thousand according to some testimonies) gathered at a demonstration of university students in Prague. The mood was completely different than at the gray, fearful and stereotypical events organized by the dissent. It was reigned by openly anti-government slogans (“Abolish StB”, “Abolish LM”, “Abolish the KSČ Monopoly”,⁸ “Free Elections Now”, “We don’t want a one-party government”), humor and self-confidence.

“At the dissidents’ demonstrations, there was always just a handful of us, revolutionaries, just waiting to be dispersed,” says Martin Klíma, one of the student leaders, contrasting this with the demonstration on November 17th. “We always tried to act in a well-mannered way, not to provoke, and we always stopped at the red light. This crowd, however, was something else, it was aware of its own strength as it surged down the streets, ignoring traffic, and just went on. (...) The people realized they’re not alone anymore, that we all think the same, and that when we’re all together, nothing can happen, that’s how strong we are...”

The people’s-democratic repression was to be, for this time, even stronger. And the police operation did not only shock participants by its violence (568 wounded, of which 180 with lasting effects), but precisely by the contrast between the feeling of strength and victory during the demonstration – and the repressive gesture of the state at its end.

Student meetings are held the same night, their topic being a protest strike.

▶▶▶▶▶ On **November 18th** university students and actors at Prague theatres declare a strike and call for a general strike on November 27th.

Charter 77,⁹ the main grouping of the Czech dissent, supported the strike and called upon the citizens to help start an society-wide dialogue on reforms. Only a few hours later, the students declare that “it makes no sense to demand a dialogue anymore” and demand the resignation of government and Party officials and the abolition of the leading role of the Party.

On the same day, news is published that a student called Martin Šmíd was killed in the police operation. It is not true but the state is only able to refute this 24 hours later; meanwhile, the news mobilizes society.

In support of protest actions, students and actors organize “beautiful rides”¹⁰ to theaters, factories and schools all over the country, in order to balance the biased coverage by the media.

⁸ StB (Státní bezpečnost or State Security) was the regime’s secret police, equivalent to the East-German Stasi. LM (Lidové milice, People’s Militias) were a mass militia organization of the KSČ. Both will be referred to by their respective acronyms below.

⁹ Charter 77 was a civic initiative established in 1977 which criticized the state for violating human rights.

¹⁰ This term was an intentional reference to the Hussite raids on surrounding regions. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hussite_Wars#Beautiful_rides for reference.

➤➤➤➤➤ On **November 19th** the Civic Forum is established on Václav Havel's initiative, which later becomes the vanguard of opposition.

➤➤➤➤➤ On **November 20th** there is a spontaneous demonstration of 200 000 people at the Václav Square.¹¹ This "storming" of the square in the center of Prague, where public gatherings were forbidden, was interpreted as a victory on the street. The chief of SSM,¹² Vasil Mohorita, supported the student strike at the demonstration.

Elsewhere, forty thousand people gather in Brno and 1 500 people in the miners' Ostrava. OF sets itself the goal of gaining control of the demonstrations.

➤➤➤➤➤ On **November 21st**, the federal prime minister Ladislav Adamec meets OF for the first time. He promises no repression, non-Party members being added to the government, and reforms, but within the framework of "socialism". He unsuccessfully demanded that the OF help end strikes in universities and theaters.

The first demonstration with OF taking the lead takes place in Prague on Václav Square. Such events with carefully planned "theatrical" scenario often take place until November 27th when OF decides to put a stop to them and return to normal.

Deputy director of the Prognostic Institute, Vladimír Dlouhý, declares that the Institute is able to quickly put forward a program of economic reform for discussion.

➤➤➤➤➤ On **November 22nd** four thousand-strong units of the LM arrive to Prague, but are withdrawn immediately.

Another demonstration takes place on the Václav Square with 200 000 participants.

➤➤➤➤➤ On **November 23rd** the General Staff decides – without the KSČ and the government knowing – on a military operation, planned on November 24th (in the Czech part, it is to consist of 7632 soldiers, 155 tanks, 92 armored vehicles...); a day later, the Central Committee of KSČ cancels the operation.

Chief of Prague KSČ Miroslav Štěpán appears in front of the workers in ČKD¹³ but is hissed out ("We are not children!").

The Czech union board denounces the general strike.

Several thousands of ČKD workers arrive at the third demonstration led by OF, headed by the forger Petr Miller. This was the first time that workers came to a demonstration as a worker collective. They declare that ČKD will join the strike, but excluding the round-the-clock shops, so that the national economy does not suffer.

➤➤➤➤➤ On **November 24th** the General Secretary of KSČ and the whole Presidium resign. However, the "new" faces couldn't stop the decline in KSČ's popularity.

¹¹ Jiří Suk: *Civic Forum*. November – December 1989. Vol. I – The Events. Other sources say that a hundred thousand people gathered (cf. *History of the demise of communist regime in Czechoslovakia 1958–1990*).

¹² SSM (Socialistický svaz mládeže, Socialist Union of Youth) was a youth organization of the KSČ.

¹³ ČKD (Českomoravská Kolben-Daněk) was one of the largest engineering companies in ČSSR, producing trams, locomotives, military vehicles and employing up to 50 000 people.

The Prague strike coordination committee issues the declaration “Workers, our friends”, according to which 1642 state enterprises, cooperatives etc. have decided to go on strike. An Association of Strike Committees of Industrial Enterprises is established for coordinating the strike and defense against repression. (Later, in Spring 1990, new unions grow out of it.)

Another demonstration of the OF (200 000 people). Miller states that about 10 thousand ČKD workers are at the demonstration and demands free elections and the LM to be abolished. For the first time ever since 1968, the symbol of Prague Spring and then Party’s First Secretary, Alexander Dubček, makes public appearance in Prague.

»»»» On **November 25th**, the Prime Minister Adamec steps down from the Central Comitee. OF supports him at the demonstration on Letenská Pláň (800 thousand people; the first demonstration to be broadcast live on state television thanks to the pressure of its employees).

The experts from the Economic and Prognostic Institutes of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences support the OF: “However, we do not want to let someone brand it [the OF] as too incompetent to solve the current deep issues of our country. Therefore we are not only joining OF, but will also provide it with our professional knowledge and abilities to formulate a program of economic change.”

»»»» On **November 26th** negotiations between the federal government and OF take place. The demands of the OF are: release of political prisoners, immediate resignation of compromised politicians, abdication of the President until the end of the year, establishment of a parliamentary commission to investigate the events of November 17th, immediate freedom of press.

At a demonstration on Letná (with more than 500 000 people) OF demanded that “after the strike the strike committees (...) transform into forums (...). At the moment we must be united, so that soon we can disperse calmly into a plethora of free trade-unionist, political, student and other organizations”. Adamec was invited by the OF to appear at the demonstration, but was hissed by the crowd (“It’s too late!”, “Resign now, resign now!”).

The students criticized OF for having too many Charter 77 representatives among the speakers, for being elitist, for manipulation and undemocratic practices in organizing the event, and decided to publicly distance themselves from OF. However, OF succeeds in persuading them not to do that.

»»»» On **November 27th**, between 12:00 and 14:00 PM, about 75% of the population take part in the strike. The main slogans: “Free elections”, “One-party rule is over”.

OF (by Havel’s initiative) calls for an end of the strike movement and of the mass demonstrations: Today, we can end the strike, tomorrow, we can eventually begin a strike if needed. And again they “recommend that the strike committees on all levels turn into Civic forums”.

Klaus states in a newspaper that “already in the present time there is a strong group of economists in our country, whose expertise is very high and in close touch

with contemporary economic science. In the old regime, their abilities could not be fully realized. These people, if they become members or advisors of the new government, will be able to combine knowledge from the end of the 60s with the experience of other countries undergoing reforms, avoid the most serious mistakes, and bring our economy to the level of Western European countries within the next decade.”

➤➤➤➤ On **November 28th**, OF demands resignation from the government. Adamec refuses this and advocates reconstruction. The OF refuses his offer to collaborate on the formation of a government and does not propose any ministers.

The students do not obey OF's call to stop the strike: “We support the OF, but wish to rebuke the views that OF had contained us.”

➤➤➤➤ On **December 3rd**, the new government is introduced (15 KSČ members, 5 non-communists).

Students announce, under the pressure of OF, that on December 4th the strike will be stopped.

OF rejects the new government under pressure from the bottom of civic society.



November 1989 filled the streets and shop windows with posters, leaflets, poems, slogans. (The fence of Faculty of Philosophy in Brno, November 26th. The big sign reads “Strike”. The smaller one on the left says “The workers are with you”, while the one on the right expresses thanks for material and moral support.)

»»»»» On **December 4th**, the streets are full of discontent with the new government: posters pop up during the night, there are petitions and demonstrations.

Students cancel the decision they made the day before and continue in the strike due to discontent with the new government.

»»»»» On **December 5th** a new Czechoslovak government is proclaimed. After an appeal by the prime minister, the OF decided to propose non-party ministers.

The economists of the Prognostic Institute chose candidates (as their “scouts”) for the economic departments of the federal government for the OF to approve. Adamec disagrees and announces he will submit his resignation, and demands support from the OF in his presidential candidacy.

»»»»» On **December 6th** OF announces they will not support Adamec.

»»»»» On **December 7th** Adamec resigns.

»»»»» On **December 8th**, on Havel’s initiative the strategy of „scouts“ is abandon and OF tries to obtain majority of strategically important departments.

»»»»» On **December 10th** the President appoints the new federal government, with Marián Čalfa (KSČ) as the Prime Minister. OF gets the Ministry of Finance (Václav Klaus – Prognostic Institute), Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (Petr Miller – ČKD), the state planning commission (Vladimír Dlouhý – Prognostic Institute), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Jiří Dienstbier – Charter 77) and the vicechairman for economy (Valtr Komárek – Prognostic Institute).

The students declare that they will remain on strike, citing KSČ dominance in the countryside (especially in Slovakia) and the slow investigation of November 17th.

At a demonstration at Václav Square, Havel’s candidacy for President is announced.

»»»»» On **December 13th** Communist MPs push through their proposal that the President will be elected directly. (According to a survey, 80% of the voters want the direct vote.) That poses a problem for the OF, because based on public opinion surveys, only 1% of the voters support Havel.¹⁴

»»»»» On **December 15th**, the federal Prime Minister Čalfa initiates a secret meeting with Havel in an eavesdropping-protected government room. He offers to “take care of” the President being voted by the Parliament and that the KSČ MPs vote for Havel. “The whole thing needs to be completely kept back, not from the StB, but from our people and from the public...,” Havel stated to his closest associates after the meeting.

¹⁴ According to a public poll in which 30 thousand people participated, 25 915 (86,3%) were undecided on the vote, 3 381 supported Dubček (over 11%), 2 356 – Komárek (7,85%), 419 – Adamec (1,39%), 303 – avel (1,01%) and 302 – Čestmír Císař (1%). (Císař was one of the protagonists of the Prague Spring in 1968; in 1970, he was expelled from the KSČ; during the 1980s, he was active in the group Obroda). (Source: Jiří Suk: *Civic Forum. November – December 1989. Volume 1 – The Events*)

»»»»» On **December 29th** the Parliament elected Havel as the President. Students end the strike.

»»»»» On **January 19th**, the OF demands that the local and factory OFs not attempt to remove the enterprise managers and administration representatives in an uncontrolled way.

»»»»» On **January 30th** the main wave of co-opting into the Federal Parliament takes place. KSČ is left with 138 seats, the Socialist and the People's Party with 17, OF and VPN got 119; the rest are independents and smaller parties.

»»»»» In **April** a controversy erupts on what course the Czechoslovak economic reform should take – according either to the plan of the Czech government (gradual), or to the plan of the Federal government (radical).

»»»»» On **May 3rd** the Federal Government decided that the economic reform will take the course of the radical scenario elaborated by the Federal Ministers Klaus and Dlouhý; the scenario of the Czech government shall be integrated into it.

»»»»» In the elections on **June 8th and 9th**, OF gains 50% in Czech regions and VPN 30% in Slovakia, while the KSČ 13% percent.

II. A change along the course of history

The chronology above implies that the events were characterized by a relatively smooth progression: as if it wasn't threatened by a single hurdle! One key moment consolidating the oppositional movement was followed by another:

the dispersed student demonstration (November 17th) - - - rumors of the death of a student, Martin Šmíd, which mobilized the masses (November 18th) - - - the first 200 000-strong demonstration, after which "things had been decided" - - - the advent of economists of the Prognostic Institute (Valtr Komárek, Václav Klaus, Vladimír Dlouhý), who self-confidently provided the opposition with know-how (November 26th) - - - appearance of ČKD workers, who provided the opposition with support from the working class (November 23rd) - - - general strike (November 27th) - - - entry of OF into the federal government (November 10th).

Indeed, the destruction of a 40-year old regime with a mass Stalinist Party (1 751 000 members, 50 thousand local organizations),¹⁵ repressive forces, unions (7 878 302 members, 27 135 local organizations)¹⁶ and People's Militias (88 494 members)¹⁷ as well as international grounding took place in a surprisingly smooth way. After all, not even the opposition itself counted with such a trouble-free handing over of power.

Why was this?

Before November 1989 it seemed that the balance of power between independent opposition and Stalinist power does not imply anything like this would happen. At a time when in Poland, Solidarity was already an established body and in Hungary there were legal oppositional parties, Stalinism in Czechoslovakia could still hold a stubbornly repressive stance against the dissidents. This was proven as late as in January 1989 in the suppression of a demonstration during Palach's Week or on October 28th when a demonstration celebrating the anniversary of the founding of Czechoslovakia was dispersed.

And the dissent itself, whose hegemon was Charter 77, really could not pride itself on being a representative of society-wide consensus for change. According to the information of the Central Committee's chairmanship from February 2nd 1989 on the independent structures' growth of influence (which historians deem reliable),

¹⁵ *Membership in parties, organizations and associations in the ČSSR population, 1. 1. 1989 [Organizovanost obyvatelstva v ČSSR v politických stranách, organizacích a svazech k 1. 1. 1989]*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

the dissent consisted of about 20 groups with 500 activists and about 5000 sympathizers.¹⁸

The dissent was tame; after Palach's week it confined itself – on the recommendation of its leader, Václav Havel – to mostly petitions (which, moreover, stirred internal conflicts with the more radical dissidents, who argued for political activity and laid stress on confrontations with the regime at demonstrations).

In spite of the *repressive power of the regime* and the *weakness of dissent*, the handing over of power in November did not go against the stream of history.

First of all, as far as the economy is concerned, Czechoslovakia was in a *down-turn*,¹⁹ following the crisis before 1968 and stagnation of the 70s. Due to the reality of bad economic development there was a growing consciousness, mostly among managerial and technical cadres, of unsustainability of the current economic model, which was lacking capital and modern technology, as well as commodities and services. It was a model characterized by a hypertrophy of heavy industry (a large internal market with means of production with huge investment costs and amortization), a model in which labor-power could not be exploited as effectively (labor productivity was declining) and was not as disciplined²⁰ as in the West, and (last but not least) a model whose low performance was substituted for, to a certain extent, by the “gray” economy, with an estimated turnover of 30 billion crowns per year...²¹

Therefore, already before 1989 there had been talk of the necessity of developing private enterprise (which was allowed to a very limited extent even during Stalinism²²), of the necessity of privatization, price liberalization and unemployment²³, of strengthening wage differentials, of restructuring heavy industry, of limiting public expenses, of loosening the capital market, the commodity market and the labor market, and sporadically there were some foreign capital investments. The main component of the intended transformation was the dismantling of huge economic conglomerates into independent state enterprises which would trade freely with each other, disregarding the central plan, and would have to manage only with what they would really earn (and the wages would depend on their economic results, too).

¹⁸ *Chronology of demise of the Czechoslovak Communist regime, 1985-1990 [Chronologie zániku komunistického režimu v Československu 1985-1990]*

¹⁹ Even though it managed to remain a country with the second highest standard of living in the Eastern bloc, after GDR.

²⁰ From 1980 to 1985, as many as 150 thousand single-family homes were built in Czechoslovakia (40 billion crowns in material and transport), while about one third of the material for their construction was stolen. (Oskar Krejčí: *Why it burst [Proč to prasklo]*)

²¹ A figure higher than the sum of wages in all of Czechoslovak machinery industry. (Oskar Krejčí: *Why it burst [Proč to prasklo]*)

²² But in a much smaller extent than in other states of the Eastern bloc. In November 1989, only 15 thousand private enterprises were registered in ČSSR. (Oskar Krejčí: *Why it burst [Proč to prasklo]*)

²³ The Prognostic Institute speculated of 750 thousand unemployed in its study. (*In the Light of Red Stars [Ve světle rudých hvězd]*, *Ekonom*, May 28th 2009).

The first glimpses of social precariousness can be traced back to the times of “perestroika”, not just to 1990.

So, the economy was not in great condition. Neither was the Communist Party.

First of all, it was internally weakened. As far as its “performance” and “competence” are concerned, it never recovered from the purges after 1969. In the purges, it got rid of one third (almost 500 000)²⁴ of its members, who belonged to the more active and “able” (even at the level of production: many managers and technicians welcomed the reforms of 1968, because they presented a way of increasing their own power within the factory and limiting the central paternalism).

The activity, capacity and functions of the party were marked by its *fusing with the state*. While on one hand it holds that it was the Stalinist Party which controlled the state (fulfilling orders from the Kremlin), it is less often added that this was not the only outcome of the fusion. It was actually the state which contained the Party, as it imposed on it the everyday questions of running the society.

The KSČ was thus less and less a political party with an ideological plan and was becoming a mere structure of repression and bureaucracy. When we read today that the chair of KSČ’s Central Committee – a top-level organ of the ruling party – concerned itself at a meeting on June 17th 1988 with the production of toilet paper, it has its absurd, grotesque aspect.²⁵ It does not mean, however, that such an absurd sequence from “the life of party and ‘socialism’” is not an authentic illustration of the extent to which the Party (at both levels, central and local) was flooded with ordinary, practical agenda, which in capitalist democracies is dealt with by the state or the market.

Moreover, in 1989 the Party had to deal with a changed international situation. The times were changing, “the unity of socialist community” was weakened. In February 1989 the chairman of the state council of Polish People’s Republic, Wojciech Jaruzelski, visiting Prague, reminded the Czechoslovak general secretary Miloš Jakeš, that the imaginary share prices of the Eastern European model were falling. Jaruzelski admitted that the declaration of state of emergency against the workers in Poland in 1981 was *de facto* the “political defeat” of “socialism” and suggested to Jakeš that it is possible to learn to live with political opposition – it is possible to assimilate it, after all (a part of Poland’s opposition, which received responsibilities, is now calling for peace and speaking against strikes, the Polish Stalinist explained).

²⁴ 327 thousand members were expelled, another 147 thousand left voluntarily.

²⁵ For the more pedantic readers: the production of toilet paper for 1989 was to be 37 500 tonnes, while the average yearly European consumption per person required 50 000 tonnes to be produced. (*Chronology of demise of the Czechoslovak Communist regime, 1985-1990* [Chronologie zániku komunistického režimu v Československu 1985-1990]). Another glimpse of the bizarre agenda of the stalinist „think tank”: a Central Committee member recollects the astonishment at his first meeting of the Committee, where 60 year old Stalinists were trying to tackle the lack of hygienic pads on the market. The „solution” was found, eventually: one of the older cadres suggested that the pads should be made thinner, so that more can be produced. (*Winners? Losers? [Vítězové? Porážení?]*).

Much more worrying for the Czechoslovak Stalinists, though, was Gorbachev's course, in two respects. First, they could not rely on support and leadership of the Soviet Union. The Perestroika-era Soviet Party made it clear to the Czechoslovak comrades that their future is in their own hands.²⁶ This required much more political responsibility and independence than these cadres were capable of, after years of what truly was mere execution of Moscow's will.

Moreover, Gorbachev's "glasnost" threatened the Czechoslovak leadership existentially, indeed. Implicitly, "glasnost" opened the question of 1968. And because the ruling cadres were a product of occupation and normalization, it was clear that any revisionism towards 1968 would crush them.²⁷

In the middle of all this, the "German question" struck Prague in September 1989. From the end of September until the 8th of November, about 42 000 East Germans – according to official data – emigrated to the West through the West German embassy in Prague. Hundreds of cars which they gladly left parked in Prague on their way to capitalist democracy were not the only thing they left behind. Citizens of Prague witnessed a practical refusal of living in "socialism". And when mass demonstrations and the fall of the Berlin Wall followed in Germany, it was clear to the Czechoslovak Stalinists that the hardline axis Berlin – Prague – Bucharest (which would not give up "socialism" as easy as Warsaw and Budapest) will never materialize.

The pulse of the times was becoming more interesting.

Several demonstrations for a better environment took place in northern Bohemia. They were not organized by the dissent, but by local, mostly young people.²⁸ And the dissent had its reason for discontent too, after all. "The whole cultural community was becoming active (...) joined by the scientific community. The dissidents were no longer living in a ghetto. The society was in motion already before November 17th. Normal contacts with actors, scientists, visual artists and students were established," the oppositional activist Jan Ruml recalls.²⁹ The petition *A few sentences (Několik vět)* was signed by about 40 thousand people and the opposition was planning a public meeting of all the signatories in Prague for December 10th. Some from the other side of the barricade say (as alibi ex post?) that KSČ was preparing a congress in December, in which it would have "progressively" opened controversial issues like the abolishing of the leading role of the Party.

²⁶ And it kept this threatening promise in November 1989.

²⁷ The USSR did not want to acknowledge the contradictions that such changes in policy created. When Miroslav Pavel, the reformist spokesperson of the government, reproached one of Moscow's cadres in Czechoslovakia that the USSR is responsible for the normalization leadership of the ČSSR, which it, after all, installed, he responded, laughing: „If you had your way, we would have to take them back to Moscow on our tanks again, wouldn't we?“ (Oskar Krejčí: *Why It Burst [Proč to prasklo]*)

²⁸ The author of one of the leaflets was a 16 year old apprentice. Demonstrations were attended by mostly apprentices, high school students and the punk subculture. (Miroslav Vaněk et al.: *Islands of Freedom [Ostrůvky svobody]*)

²⁹ *10 days in Prague [10 pražských dnů]*.

Completely different meetings took place in November in the end, because the ripe times were pushed forward by the student demonstration on November 17th. It is characteristic of the changing spirit of the times that even though the controversial demonstration was initiated by an independent student group, it was shielded by the Socialist Union of Youth and approved by both the City- and Central Committee of the KSČ.

III. Handing over of power: the anatomy

The fact that the changes of November did not go against the stream of history does not mean that we should minimize the role of its agents. Despite their gradual course, the events did not free the opposition from having to carefully consider and manage the change.

The situation not only required a talent for tactics and improvising as far as *immediate* steps with immediately visible outcomes (concerning the suppression of KSČ) were concerned.³⁰

From the point of view of the opposition, much more was at stake.

At a time when it was becoming more and more clear that the important thing is “what next” – forming the *future* political-economic order – the opposition had to manage the transformation toward a more effective way of exploiting labor power and a modern, democratic form of capitalist domination over proletariat while ensuring that after the fall of the people’s-democratic order it would come out as the strongest future ruling power.

If we are to attempt to find out how it managed its role of opposition in November, and, most importantly, whether the working class found itself and asserted itself as an independent power in the whirlwind of the events of November, we have to dedicate the following part to the *concrete anatomy of the November change*.

OF and the students: the vanguard and its “brutal force” on a leash

The events were started by the suppression of a student demonstration on November 17th. That very evening, students are beginning to organize for protests: even though they had no previous experience with strikes, they decide on an occupation and look for allies. They find allies in Prague’s actors. The most decisive students (from DAMU) were already in touch with them; moreover, the actors had the added value of popularity and, very importantly, they were in touch with the public in theaters and could influence it that way.

These two groups – students and actors – are the forces which lie at the roots of November. The next day, Saturday November 18th, is fully under their direction. When a spokesperson of Charter 77 comes with a declaration to their meeting, he is outflanked by the students’ own declaration: their positions are inexplicably more radical than the defensive declarations of Charter 77, written routinely and with little

³⁰ After all, the federal prime minister Ladislav Adamec, a solitaire, was a more difficult and smarter opponent for the opposition than the clumsy KSČ.

anticipation. The position of the dissidents is so “out of touch” (obsolete as far as the current events were concerned) that the spokesperson decides to rather not read it. (A day later, this declaration will become the basic outline for the founding declaration of the OF.)

In the beginnings of the November events, really the only alternative to the dissidents’ politics was the student movement.³¹ And not only that. In many ways, it was ahead of the dissent: both in terms of strategy (while the dissidents and their later product, OF, kept talking about dialogue, the students emphasized that there is no room for dialogue anymore) and in terms of program and organization building.

Even though the student movement tried to address all of society,³² *it did not become the creator and representative of a society-wide consensus*. This role was left to OF; more precisely, the OF assumed this role by *taking the lead on the street and initiating dialogue with power*.

OF, the real vanguard of the change in November, was founded on Sunday, November 19th in the theater “Činoherní klub”. Its founding was prepared by the dissidents of Charter 77. The OF was created as a grouping of dissidents, actors and representatives of various churches who were to “represent the will of 40 thousand signatories of *A few sentences*”.

A day later, the first spontaneous demonstration of 200 000 still takes place without relying on OF (one of the speakers was chairman of the Socialist Union of Youth, Vasil Mohorita). Right after it, the OF sets itself the goal to *gain control of the demonstrations*.

It is able to do that as soon as the next day, remaining the director of mass events on the streets ever since. The peaceful demonstrations staged by the OF bear little similarity with an open discussion or soapboxing. Their screenplay is very precise: they are a carefully prepared *spectacle*, an organized show. The way the crowd is handled by the organizers truly has a touch of theater and great sense of detail.

The demonstrations cannot take more than about an hour (as the key OF activist, Alexandr Vondra,³³ later explained, “We couldn’t let the people get tired, we had to keep them in a certain tension all the time”). Speakers are chosen beforehand; for PR reasons, actors, sportsmen and singers appear on stage, with their moral credit exploding; celebrities known from the Stalinist media as well as emigrants, dissidents, and a scientist or worker here and there. The director makes sure that the overall impression stays true to the original intent: he pays attention to a balanced

³¹ Although gradually, the camp of moderates (students of technical and scientific schools) prevailed over the „radicals“ from art schools.

³² One of the student leaders, Šimon Pánek, explains: We didn’t want to repeat the mistake of 1968, when the students were left on their own, and so we thought that the most important thing is to connect and address the whole population. (*10 days in Prague [10 pražských dnů]*.)

³³ *10 days in Prague [10 pražských dnů]*.

measure of speeches and songs (once again Vondra: "So that the people know we aren't old bores like the Stalinists and that we know how to have fun"³⁴), plays around with emotions and doses national pathos to the crowd covered with tricolors.

And just as the OF could take control of the demonstrations (and put an end to them in Prague after seven days, this embargo being respected by the street), it could also establish itself as the hegemon in negotiations with the Stalinist power. It meets the federal prime minister Adamec as soon as on November 21st.

Whatever happened to the students? Compared to the OF, they were the more radical element,³⁵ which demanded a faster and less compromising reckoning with "communism". An element with which the OF often disagreed and did not want to let it be heard too much.

The OF's relationship to the students was however more plastic and delicate. However much the OF did not want to let the students interfere, it knew that they had to be counted with. "...even though we sometimes felt the students weren't going the right way, we rather stayed with them all night and argued with them, but we never tried to force the issue," says another OF representative, Petr Pithart.³⁶

This patient relationship the hegemon of opposition had to have towards the "radicals" grew not only out of the student's moral authority of "those who started the revolution". The position of students in relation to the OF was also strong, as Pithart himself admits, for purely practical reasons: students were the mobile infrastructure of the whole movement. Especially at the time when the opposition was being ignored or slandered by the media, the students played an indispensable role. They were the ones who led and coordinated "the struggle for people's hearts and minds". They undertook and coordinated tours to towns and villages all over the country to spread the "velvet revolution",³⁷ they took care of distributing leaflets and putting up posters...

OF therefore devoted maximum energy and long debates to keep the students' support. Despite the crises of their relationship, it managed to keep them on its side. When, for instance, the students wanted to publicly distance themselves from OF because of how it directed the demonstration on Letná,³⁸ panic struck OF and

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Moreover, the students were difficult and slow to talk into supporting OF. For the first few days, they considered the OF to be just another „Chartist grouplet“, while being very sceptical towards the Chartists.

³⁶ *10 days in Prague [10 pražských dnů]*.

³⁷ "To agitate, awaken and inform; a student, an actor and a sportsman were traveling together, which was a happy marriage that had the best chance of truly affect the wide masses. It was really a kind of an information war..." says Pánek, adding that the dissidents could not play this role, because the population still did not trust them and considered them „subversives“. (*10 days in Prague [10 pražských dnů]*) Prague treated Ostrava, the traditional mining town, and Pilsen, the centre of Škoda, with special care: „We need personalities with credit to go there.“ (Miroslav Anton: *November 1989 in Pilsen [Listopad 1989 v Plzni]*)

³⁸ They criticized the high amount of Charta 77 speakers and the manipulative and populist presenting of the event by the priest Václav Malý, but also undemocratic practices of the OF, which provided no space to representatives of Prague Communists.

its leadership took extreme care to talk the students out of their intention. With similar effort the OF patiently but decisively persuaded the students on December 2nd and 3rd not to continue in the strike.³⁹

Pithart's view of the OF – students partnership is filled in, or perhaps corrected, by the the student leader Martin Klíma: “When the students stand up, you have to comply, but this was really done only with a lot of reluctance. (...) We always had the feeling that they viewed the students as a brutal force that can be directed to work through their way. Later on we no longer were this force.”⁴⁰ The “wild” component of the handing over of power was really necessary mostly in the first days after November 17th.

The importance of students declines already after the general strike of November 27th. Representatives of the student coordination center were not invited



Alexander Dubček and Václav Havel drink to the resignation of KSČ's leadership.

³⁹ With success, though a short-lived one. Ending the strike was advocated with OF as well as students of Economics, Civil Engineering and technical degrees in general. Art students of the AMU (Academy of Performing Arts) were most vigorously against ending the strike, and proved their closest relation to the mood on the streets. OF and a part of the students argued for an end of the strike due to what they perceived as satisfactory composition of the new government (15 Communists and 5 non-communists) while the AMU students found it outrageous. When even the streets of Prague protested against this government, the students relaunched the strike and OF had to reject the government.

⁴⁰ *10 days in Prague [10 pražských dnů]*.

to important meetings of the OF (where the strategy of negotiations with the federal PM Adamec, as well as the demands on government, were discussed) and neither were any students among the members of OF's coordination center delegation at the meetings of decisive political powers (where, paradoxically, the antipode of the student movement, the Socialist Union of Youth, was present).

All in all, when we speak of opposition, it's principally the OF.

And not only that.

It is mostly Prague.

OF was completely a Prague organ: the Regional OFs only met with the center as late as December 23rd, more than a month after its founding! This does not mean, however, that the regions were unimportant in the process of handing over of power. If the oppositionist Prague couldn't rely on support across the country, the situation would have been much more complicated. And that is why the "beautiful rides" aimed for the countryside. But the truth is that in November and December the regions practically did not intervene in high politics at all. After all, a chapter in itself is the different social dynamic of November in Prague and in the countryside. While Prague awakened soon after November 17th, perplexity and distrust towards the oppositional movement prevailed in other cities (not to mention smaller towns and villages).⁴¹ The activity and influence of regions (along with the critique of the OF's policy of "decommunization", which was viewed as not offensive enough – the removal of stalinist structures – and the critique of undemocratic decision-making in OF) will only rise in spring of 1990 (see below).

Second, when we speak about the Prague leadership of OF, it is an organ with a completely non-working class composition: just as the workers were missing in the list with which Jan Ruml tried to prove that the dissent "is breaking out of the ghetto", they were subsequently missing in the OF itself. In this respect there was full continuity between the dissent and the OF. When the committee of the coordination center met on December 11th, there was but one worker.

Third, were are speaking of an organ in which the important decisions were made by highest ranking representatives who were not elected (and neither were they recallable). Practically all essential steps were decided upon by a ten member task force (or an extended task force), at the core of which was Havel, plus Vondra and Jiří Křížan as his adjutants. An action group with some 30 members exerted some

⁴¹ A student from Pilsen recalls when he came back home on November 20th, after a weekend in Prague where he experienced the exciting atmosphere of the forming opposition, he felt „like a fool“ with the tricolor pinned to his coat. *In November 1989 in Pilsen [Listopad 1989 v Plzni]* Miroslav Anton writes that when the same day an activist tried to contact a group of workers from Škoda at a square downtown, "they thought him crazy. Some recommended to him not to provoke them," and states that when a day later, students from Prague came arrived for a „beautiful ride“ in Pilsen, they „created what was almost a shock“ even among the local oppositional activists, because they „categorically demanded resignation of some people from political functions and putting them on trial because of the events of 1969. Also the declaration of general strike looked almost unreal“.

influence, while the general assembly, which was supposed to be a point of contact between the leaders and the “membership”, was more and more displaced. Not only did it lack decision-making powers. As time went, with the hectic and bustling developments, OF’s leadership found it more and more difficult to even come to the assembly to explain its decisions. The assembly was being set back as soon as after November 29th. In the time after December 4th, when the OF bargained for power with the government, it was almost completely irrelevant. While it is true that struggles do not begin with a ballot and an examination of what the majority view is (efforts at the strongest possible unity of workers in struggle are a prerequisite of victory, but the struggle is started by a decisive and determined action of a minority), the reality which prevailed in OF long after November 19th is evidence of the lack of self-activity and power of its activists of the lowest layers.

Quite soon, actually right after the general strike, the OF recognized that it no longer needs the immediate pressure of the street: it is enough to keep it “frozen” and use it as a threat against the falling Stalinist power when needed.

As it turned out, it was not necessary. When the OF, armed with the established society-wide consensus (still not too wide, but relatively strong and significant) entered the negotiations behind closed doors, it realized that on the other side of the roundtable, there was nothing but the wreckage of Stalinist monopoly.



The talks of federal government with OF.
Ladislav Adamec, the prime minister, on the left, Václav Havel, the OF’s chief, on the right.

The Stalinist apparatus: power of the powerless

"I am sorry, but who exactly were we wrestling the power from? (...) From the prime minister of the Czech Republic, František Pitra, who for 15 minutes urged us, holding an open pen, to finally dictate to him the names of our candidates for ministers in the Czech government, which we, however, have not prepared yet?"

Petr Pithart,⁴² replying to an article by the social-democratic ex-dissident Jaroslav Šabata, who celebrated the "heroic revolution" which in 1989 "wrestled the power" from the hands of the Stalinists.⁴³

The reformist part of KSČ did not have enough power to establish itself in November as the director of the necessary economic and political modernization, and the conservative majority in the Party was not at all capable of somehow defending the pre-November status quo.⁴⁴

Of course, the Party could not rely on its approved tool, repression, facing the demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of people in Prague. But the weakness of the regime is attested to by the fact that it did not decide for repression during the first two days after November 17th, when the movement was still forming: security forces did not disperse the spontaneous demonstrations on Saturday and Sunday on Václav Square (whose conquest had a significant symbolic meaning for the public) and did not attempt to prevent people from organizing debates in theaters.

The army did flirt with the idea of an armed repression of the movement, but the Party chose not to do that. The People's Militia were not engaged either: at first, the Party summoned them to Prague, but recalled them the night from 21st to 22nd of November. Four hundred militiamen, who still arrived in Prague, were sent home. Moreover, the USSR did not intervene in the situation, and the threats of economic sanctions for deserting the "socialist camp" through stopping the oil pipeline or by means of military "help" were not fulfilled.⁴⁵

Of course, this does not mean that the Stalinist did not try to react to the development in some way. In the first days their tactic was: prevent the "undesirable elements" from entering the factories (police were stopping cars of the "beatiful rides" aiming for the countryside, confiscating materials, militiamen and unionists were barring them from factories...); try to split the movement between the students and OF; point out

⁴² 1989 without the Newspeak (*Devětaosmdesátý bez „neočeří“*, *Literární noviny*, January 5th 2004).

⁴³ A spot on Pithart's beauty (*Piha na Pithartově kráse*, *Literární noviny*, 2003).

⁴⁴ In the game of chess with its opponent, the OF first of all used the pro-reformist Adamec, who was playing for himself and not the Central Committee, against the hardline stalinists, only to checkmate him too later on.

⁴⁵ While the Soviet ambassador promised to the students in November that they have nothing to worry about as far as the USSR is concerned, the US embassy did not want to interfere either. A US diplomat refused to photocopy the students' declaration: „I am sorry, gentlemen... Your government already accuses us of actively supporting anti-government forces..." He nodded to the question if he could provide shelter for them at the embassy in case Stalinist tanks arrive, but added: „What else can we do..." (*10 days in Prague [10 pražských dnů]*)

that the OF is demagogic and manipulates people; keep the base organizations of the Party and militia in the factories; establish “communist democratic forums” as competitors of the Civic forums and strike committees to diminish their influence; infiltrate the Civic forums or establish their own, alternative Civic forums (as in the case of the mining region around Ostrava); evoke an atmosphere of cooperation between KSČ and OF.

Soon it became clear, though, that the KSČ is not a living organization that would be able to take the initiative and be a competent adversary of the opposition. The crisis of Stalinism was deeper than it seemed.

What could the Party, whose “leading role” existed only on paper of the Constitution, actually rely on?

In the lower, local levels of the Party, there was helplessness about what to do, as well as expectations of instructions from above (which either were not coming at all, or were contradictory and inadequate vis-a-vis reality), but also lack of confidence in their own Party. A distrust that, of course, did not spring to life with the violent dispersing of the students’ demonstration: we may, with a grain of salt, quote the survey of May 1989, in which 57% of KSČ members and 52% of its officials expressed the belief that the officials running the “perestroika” in ČSSR are not a guarantee of its successful implementation. In June a different survey revealed that only 46% members would want to join the Party again if given the chance, while 29% would not and 25% were undecided.

Could the KSČ then rely on the economic base of its reign, on the state monopoly and its managers, who were, as far as their material interests were considered, tied to it? In this publication, we focus on the anatomy of a few weeks in November and December 1989 and the more political aspects of the transformation; there is not enough space here (and not enough detailed knowledge of the everyday workings of the pre-November economy on our side) to deal with the question of the economic nature of Stalinism in Czechoslovakia. Again, we have to refer the readers to a text we are planning to publish on this topic.

Here we would like to anticipate, though, that the Stalinist economy can not be understood unless we look beyond the legal forms of property. These do not speak much of material, factual relationships in the concrete process of production and circulation. Whatever the *de iure* status was, individual capitals operated in ČSSR already before November, with their administrators acting as the *de facto* owners, and they were actually competing with each other (trying to achieve a softer plan from the state, more investments and resources, softer environmental restrictions etc.).

The Stalinist economic nomenclature was more and more increasing the role of entrepreneurs during the process of “normalization” in the 1970s and 80s: they were allowed more and more autonomy, there was both more space for initiative and pressures on performance – elements of capital profits. The more successful managers were (apart from becoming greater bonuses) strengthening their own power

in the economy against the competitors' managers, they could appropriate a greater portion of surplus value in the form of investments etc. The power of the strongest ones, such as the managers of state export companies (like Chemapol, Ferromet, Motokov, Skloexport, Omnipol...) or big engineering companies, was growing upwards – they could designate their own exponents in the central planning commission or in the Central Committee. The plan was therefore constituted according to the processes and pressures of the real economy, the needs of value and the power of individual capitals, whose functionaries these managers were.

More and more members of the nomenclature were getting into a position of big businessmen through their engagement in conglomerates. The number of "socialist" millionaires was rising.

Did they have any interest in maintaining the regime?

Why would they? It did not grant them as much autonomy as they wanted. They lacked a market which would not be fettered by "supplier-purchaser" tables, they lacked foreign currency, they could not fully use their privileges. Of course they would be happy to accumulate in the form of money capital at least a small part of the wealth that they had to accumulate as social capital in the conditions of a strangled market. And of course they wished they had the ability to privately invest this wealth.

Based on their own material interests, they certainly did not see their own future in the context of the old, pre-November economy. It gave them wings, but did not allow them to fly too high.

They certainly did not worry about defending the pre-November regime – they focused on the economic terrain and on creating the best conditions for transformation to a more liberal economic regime. After its rise, there was a demand for such cadres – they had the information, contacts and experience. For foreign companies who ventured into the newly open market, they were the indispensable guides, and they could get hold of companies easier than anyone else.

The deputies at economic departments, bosses and managers of state companies, bankers, as well as Stalinist bureaucrats in charge of regions (viewing the regions as commercial entities) exploited their headstart. Being a member of the top-administration during "socialism" was an important factor in the transformation to entrepreneurship after November. Only a tiny fraction of people who weren't members of the KSČ and held no position in management before 1989 were successful in the early transformation and managed to become important businessmen.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Vladimír Benáček: *On the origin and sources of the changes in Czech business elite. Lidé města*, no. 1., 2008. [O původu a zdrojích proměn české podnikatelské elity.]

The working class: Captive in the Stalinist experience and the concept of citizenship

We have emphasized that neither history nor the former ruling class stood in the way of the opposition. This, however, does not mean that it had been a purely “backstage” sort of handing over of power. The OF was not the proverbial general without an army, it could lean on demonstrations and public support, the streets were full of posters with calls, criticism of the KSČ, jokes and poems. November 1989 chimed with hope, spontaneous solidarity and creativity.

Where was the working class?

Of course, there were workers on the city squares. And not only that: the coming of the ČKD contingent led by Petr Miller (then still a forger) to the Václav Square was a decisive moment, whose weight and significance were noted by everyone and perhaps gave Stalinism the final blow. The message that “The King is naked!” (the “Communist” party represents the workers who couldn’t care less) was clear.

As a class with specific interests, though, the workers were absent in the events of November.

The center of November 1989 was outside the workplaces

“We agreed that if we are to organize something in Škoda, it is necessary to join forces with the people from theaters and students.”

A witness of the meeting of two Škoda workers with an independent activist on November 20th in Pilsen.⁴⁷

The working class did not initiate November 1989, nor was it able to occupy the space freed by the faltering Stalinist social monopoly with its own agenda.

One of the rare examples where the class intervened in the events through the prism of “labor – capital” was the leaflet *“Questions of concern to workers”*,⁴⁸ which appeared on the streets of Prague after November 17th (and which bears witness to the fact that information on the economic changes being discussed then leaked to the public).

The 37 questions it lists are a testimony on the wide range of topics that brought people to the streets: they concern the environment, medical supplies or inadequate hospital capacities for workers, the existence of special health clinics for the Party elite. But they also contain points written from a point of view which was far from common in the days of November:

⁴⁷ Miroslav Anton: *November 1989 in Pilsen. [Listopad 1989 v Plzni]*

⁴⁸ *10 days in Prague [10 pražských dnů].*

“5. Who is responsible for such a state of the economy in which the government counts on closing down iron works, mines etc.? What will the redundant people do? Are the fifty-year old metallurgists and miners supposed to go and work in services?”

6. What will be the consequences of the construction embargo, which the government wants to extend until summer? What about one million construction workers? What about the already built capacities? Who ever asked any of us construction workers to speak their minds on this question?

7. Is it true that the government drafted a scenario counting with 1 million unemployed?”

The leaflet is an attempt at looking at living conditions from the working class point of view – and it’s a view which was very rare in the context of November 1989. The “Velvet Revolution” was dominated by the perspective of a “civil society” or “citizenship”, workplaces were not at its center. They functioned as a support to what was going on on the main stage, as a support to the students and the OF.

The OF did not want to let the genie out of the bottle: it preferred peace and an orderly course of the “revolution after working time”, as the historian Jan Měchýř called it.



Workers of Metrostav company at a demonstration

“We didn’t want the people to go on strike whenever they wanted. We wanted the events to proceed peacefully, without economic shocks,” the OF activist Václav Malý explains, “for example, some people from a ward in Prague came in, saying they’ll close down all the shops. We strongly opposed that and explained to these people – who certainly had good intentions – that we don’t want economic swings, that it’s necessary that life goes on (...) That’s why we planned the demonstrations after working time, so that no one could reproach us as people who want economic destruction, destabilization, who want to bring economic and social chaos.”

Not even the general strike was supposed to hurt – the OF called for it to be purely demonstrative. 25% of employees obeyed, 15 to 20% did not partake in the strike of their own will and the rest were prevented from participating.⁴⁹ The workers did not use the strike as a means for struggle on their own workplaces, which could have made a political force of them. The action turned out the way the OF wanted it to – tidily. If workers did not “participate” in the strike by the mere pinning of tricolor on their clothes, they had to make up for the time lost to strike anyway. The discipline of 15 to 20 thousand workers who gathered in the premises of Škoda in Pilsen was so strong, that this mass of people waited for the company management to be elected and set forth for the demonstration at the Republic Square in town only after the company director permitted to open the factory gates.⁵⁰ A truly revolutionary attitude!

Moreover, right after the strike the OF declares: The time of mass demonstrations is over!

On the other hand: at the beginning of December the Association of strike committees registered up to five thousand committees. Did the committee pay attention to the hierarchy in companies, did they exploit the situation to struggle against bosses and managers – exponents of Stalinist authority, who they were in direct contact with? According to historians, after the strike the strike committees focused mostly on checkmating and replacing Stalinist unions (in the end, the committees actually transformed in March 1990 into unions); however, the historical works do not provide a look inside the microcosm of factories.

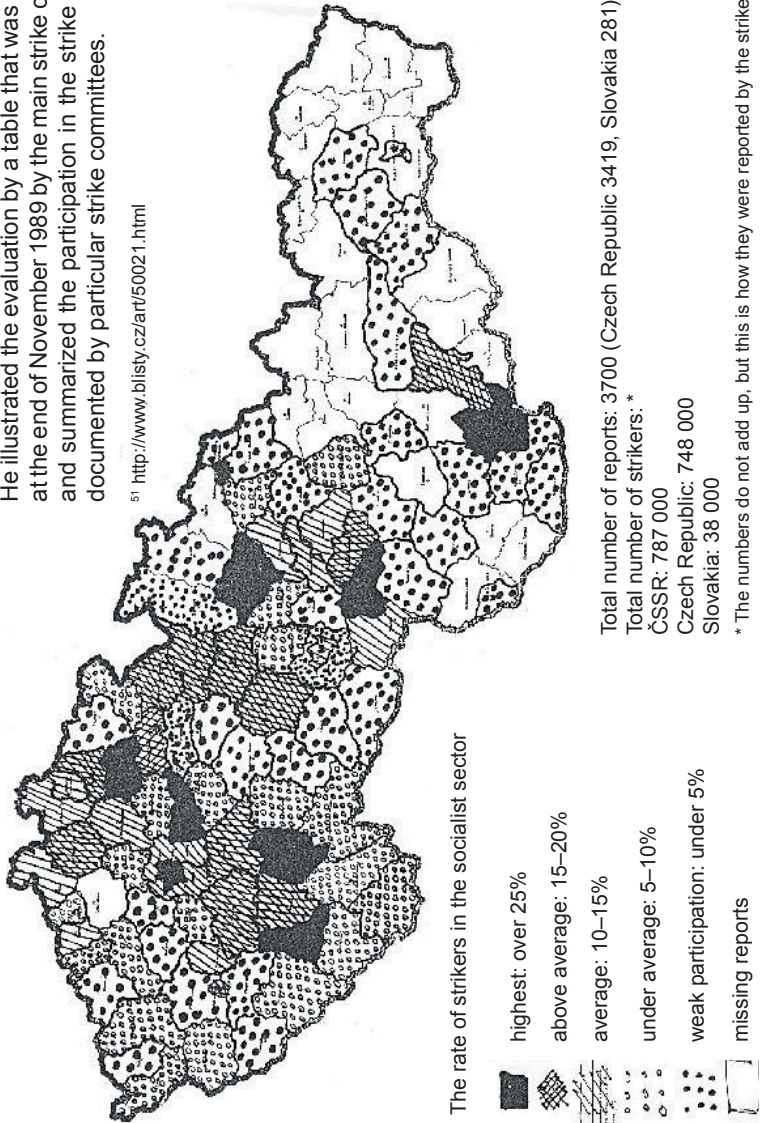
⁴⁹ Jan Měchýř: *The great overthrow, or perhaps a velvet revolution? [Velký převrat či snad revoluce sametová?]*

⁵⁰ The director at Škoda already turned out to be an „appreciative” partner of the employees before. When a few days before the strike he met with a small group of workers, he willingly promised that if they make up for the strike, they can organize a meeting in the factory. He also offered setting up an improvised stage for them. A Pilsen activist, who recorded the events of November in the book *November 1989 in Pilsen*, comments on this: „It was an almost unbelievable result. We need to keep in mind that the demands were pushed through by five, six people who didn’t even know each other the week before!” This bears witness not only of how willingly the Stalinist boss of a company submitted to the dynamic of the times, but especially of the extent of working class organization in November 1989 (and before) in a company with 40 thousand employees (!).

In November 2009 Petr Miller, a forger in ČKD and later OF's Minister of Labor, wrote in an article for the on-line journal *Britské listy*: "That strike was not in fact a strike. Already during the negotiations of OF with Adamec, I told the latter that the we will compensate for the working time lost to the strike. It was more of a test of how people in factories around the country would react. The results were quite lamentable (...) When we were evaluating the participation in the strike, it was a bit of a disappointment. We expected something like that, but still hoped for better results."⁵¹

He illustrated the evaluation by a table that was produced at the end of November 1989 by the main strike committee and summarized the participation in the strike as it was documented by particular strike committees.

⁵¹ <http://www.blisty.cz/art/50021.html>



Early 1990: the wave of deposing the bosses

Jumping a few months ahead, we see that the workplaces livened up in early 1990, when there was a lot of wildcat strikes (both in key sectors, such as in iron works, mines, but also in others – hotels etc.). They were mostly related to the spontaneous repealing of company management and posed such a huge problem, that the Czech government had to discuss them, issuing a warning that the development “in its consequences leads up to a disintegration of management structures and endangers the smooth functioning of the economy.”⁵²

The OF prompted the local forums not to repeal managers spontaneously, the “plague” of the votes of no confidence was addressed by the press (jokingly, sometimes: “Sit down, please”, says a worker to a colleague, “when the boss comes back saying the break is over, we’ll push a vote of no confidence...”), but most importantly, by the unions. They invoked the necessity of “increasing the criteria of management on labor discipline, with support from the unions, and increasing the responsibility of each of us.”

The strikes failed to generalize and interconnect, and the newly established unions gradually gained control of the isolated conflicts.

This whole contradictory process (sometimes there was not working class anger behind the repeals, but frays among influential groups trying to get hold of a company) had wider connotations and impacts. To a certain extent, it was related to the “emancipation” of regional OFs from the Prague center: the regional forums had the feeling that the “decommunisation” was not progressing fast enough. While the dissident part of the Prague OF rejected this “second revolution”, Václav Klaus jumped on the bandwagon of this “movement” of the regions, took control of it, pacified the most radical “anti-communist” loudmouths and became a hegemon first in the OF and then on the political scene in general.

The dead echo of 1968

This weakness of the working class in November can be partly elucidated by the fact that while the civil dissent could rely at least on some structures of its own, the proletariat was even worse off.

The unpreparedness of the class also had to do with the lack of any militant experience during the 1970s and 80s.

The proletariat in Czechoslovakia had no Gdańsk.

The only experience that the process of November referred to was 1968. From the point of view of the present, when the “Velvet Revolution” is celebrated in official

⁵² *The Czech government on employee replacement, Rudé právo, February 15th 1990. [Vláda ČR k výměně pracovníků]*

discourse and the Prague Spring is ignored or reprehended, the relation between the two processes seems not so close, but it was palpable in November 1989.

The heritage of 1968 was so strong that even according to the Czechoslovak Democratic Initiative's (ČSDI; marginal,⁵³ but the most political and right-wing grouping that the dissent produced – and ostracized) statement on November 17th, which was much more radical than the stance of Charter 77 and demanded the government to resign, one third of the positions in the new transitory government should actually be occupied by... the "socialist" reformers of the Prague Spring!

1968 was in a way respected even by the Stalinist KSČ. And not only because it haunted it as a historical skeleton in the cupboard (in May 1989, 43% percent of KSČ members replied that 1968 was not an attempt at liquidating socialism, and 60% thought that after August 1968, many people were unjustly persecuted⁵⁴). KSČ's leadership thought of the Prague Spring as of a present, current danger. They were much more worried by the excluded reformist "communists" from the Klub za socialistickou přestavbu Obroda ("Club for Socialist Reconstruction – Renewal")⁵⁵ than by the dissidents of Charter 77 and other independent groups. For the KSČ, the dissidents were amateurs, but the 68ers, political matadors with experience in high ranks, were considered by the leadership (especially in the conditions of "perestroika" and "glasnost") as a dangerous adversary in the struggle for power.⁵⁶

1968 could not be ignored by the opposition either: it was a symbol that could be exploited, but in no way would the opposition want to allow the depth and extent of the intended changes to be limited by the heritage of 1968. Right-wing economists operating in the OF did not aim to be prisoners of history. In their memories of November they openly admit that as far as the derided and dangerous heritage of the Prague Spring was concerned, their strategy was: use and transcend. For them, too, was 1968 a present threat. Just as the KSČ leadership was more afraid of the 68ers than of the dissidents, the OF leadership was more afraid of the reformist "communists" than of the KSČ. More precisely, afraid of the 68ers of "Obroda" taking initiative and making a deal with KSČ which would freeze the process of November (see below).

And third of all, 1968 with its naïve self-management ideology and democratic "socialism" was the only point of reference for anyone on the left of KSČ. But even

⁵³ During 1989 ČSDI had the ambitions of „upgrading“ the independent opposition and compete with the apolitical Charter 77. The explanation of why it failed, provided by ČSDI boss Emanuel Mandler, has a certain relevance for understanding the social composition of the environment from which the opposition recruited new forces: We lost against havel because he managed to contact the cultural circles, say Mandler in *10 days in Prague [10 pražských dnů]*.

⁵⁴ Oskar Krejčí: *Why it burst [Proč to prasklo]*.

⁵⁵ The Club announced its founding in a declaration in February 1989.

⁵⁶ *Proposals for using political means against domestic and foreign forces attacking socialist social order prepared for a meeting of the Central Committee presidium on November 17th 1989 [Návrhy na využití politických prostředků proti domácím a zahraničním silám útočícím na socialistické společenské zřízení]* (Oskar Krejčí: *Why it burst [Proč to prasklo]*)

on this reformist level there was nothing left of 1968 in the practical sense. The “Obroda” club was detached from the working class both in terms of age, as well as of practice:⁵⁷ it was a grouping of ex-officials of the KSČ, whose goal was mostly to make their Party admit it was wrong, apologize and give them personal and political satisfaction.

There was little left of the reformist 1968.⁵⁸

Murmuring, petitions and strike threats

In March 1989, the Ministry of Interior ordered the Sbor národní bezpečnosti (the National Security Corps, with two parts, the uniformed “Public Security” with standard police duties, and the secret “State Security”, the plainclothes intelligence and counterintelligence agency) to issue situation reports on what is going on at workplaces. The 186 reports give a glimpse, certainly not a complete one, of the “negative opinions and sentiments” and at least in a typified way express what issues the working class reacted upon and in what way.

The frequent waves of *rumors* expressed rising worries over living standards and involved a whole spectrum of commodities, from the press, construction materials, electronics up to groceries and flats.

The red thread running through the reports is *murmuring and verbal discontent*: according to the security, the workers used party meetings to voice their critique (“Because the organizers could not handle the situation, it was necessary to cancel the meeting untimely.” ZTS Martin, a heavy machinery company, in July), informants record opinions that “issues are not being resolved to the benefit of the working class, those above have privileges”, “Communists should look the truth in the eye”, “the perestroika will be at the expense of the workers”, “with the right friends you can drink your way to the Order of Labor (a civilian award for labor achievements)”, “the unions are passive, they are not able to stand up for us”.

In the Škoda factory in České Budějovice, the workers demanded an increase in wage tariffs by 50% due to inflation by a *petition*.

A report from May reads that in a nickel smelting plant in Sereď, the workers threatened to *collectively quitting their jobs* due to low wages. In June in Brno, there was the threat of 600 workers leaving an industrial construction company, including union officials, due to wage and cadre policy. From January to March 1989, 170 notices to leave job were registered in the cement and lime works

⁵⁷ To be fair, the Stalinists did much to make any contacts with the working class more difficult, as one comrade told us. After the 68ers were thrown out of their Party, company or academic jobs, they were relocated to worker professions, but with great attention paid to keep them as isolated as possible. This was allegedly also the case in Škoda in Pilsen.

⁵⁸ If in November 1989 there appeared some marginal attempts at taking up the self-management ideas of 1968, like in Škoda in Pilsen (with the very 68ers initiating them), they were mostly sterile and had no chance of interfering in the events.

in Rohožník (western Slovakia) – because due to adverse economic results of the company the workers had not received any bonuses and because the Polish workers were allegedly receiving more than double wages.

The informants recorded several strike threats: in May, uranium miners in western Bohemia threatened to “go down the shaft and not return in the fashion of Kosovo”, in June the miners of the “Red October” pit in Ostrava-Heřmanice were “allegedly willing to strike” to eliminate overtime which was implemented to lower costs; in September the workers of ZTS Martin “resolutely demand”- that “in 15 days time talks start to eliminate the shortcomings, otherwise they will stop work”, due to “wages and social security” and “inadequate working conditions”. The miners of ČSSR noted the strikes of their colleagues in the USSR: one of the reports from August mentions that in connection with the strikes in Soviet pits, “the miners of the May 1st Pit in Karviná believe that only by such means can better social and working conditions achieved”. When in September there are “rumors of substantial redundancies” among quarrymen in the uranium mines near Žďár nad Sázavou, “opinions have appeared that in the fashion of USSR, it should be considered whether strikes could help to postpone reduction and stopping of mining”.

There were some actual work stoppages: In May, the informants record that in a Agrozeta Brno factory in Rožňava, “assembly workers have for several hours on at present undetermined days stopped work in protest” against the economic situation, “information sources characterize the situation as a ,silent strike””. In the heavy machinery works in Komárno a marginal strike was even successful: on September 3rd and 4th, eight workers hadn’t showed up for work, later saying “the reason was lowering of the average wage”. “On September 7th, company management decided that these workers will be compensated, and they resumed work”.

The class reacted to a whole range of problems: from the (alleged) prices rises, working conditions, the wage questions to redundancy threats. To voice their critique, the workers used meetings which were intended by the Stalinist organizers as means of publicly condemning *A few sentences*. A special issue were the immigrant workers from Poland (receiving more money for the same work) and Hungarian and Polish citizens who were “massively shopping for consumption goods in ČSSR”.

Because we can assume that only the most significant cases got in the reports, the list of workplace “incidents” and their intensity are certainly not astonishing (moreover, the threats were not realized according to the security). But it bears evidence to the fact that the workers’ relations to their living and working conditions were not idyllic and that they reflected upon the economic and political crisis of Stalinism. At the same time, however, the reports are testimony of the fact that working class discontent did not manage to find a more *organized form* before November 1989.

Two sides of the same coin: the Stalinist hyperpoliticization and the dissidents' "apolitical politics"

In our inquiry of the shape of the working class in which it was caught by November 1989, it is worth considering the nature of politics in Stalinism.

The experience of Czechoslovak proletariat before November 1989 was one of life in conditions in which modern democracy was absent, of life in a state, where the separation between political life and civil society was not complete, in a state which did not have the various mechanisms for channeling its inner conflicts which a capitalist democracy usually has at its disposal.

If civil society in the *widest sense* is an "airbag" of sorts, which can protect capitalist democracies from shocks, the Stalinist regime was all the more fragile, as it lacked such a pillow. All that can be integrated inside the system by the market, state or non-governmental institutions in a capitalist democracy, was in Stalinism considered as something that represents a political threat to the system.

As Václav Havel in his 1978 book, *The Power of the Powerless* [*Moc bezmocných*] (which is worth noting, because it became a canon of sorts of "non-ideological ideology" of the dissent), put it: "In conditions where politics were abolished as an area of human action, in such conditions, in which it was thrown out of the door, it seemed to be coming back through the window; everything becomes cryptopolitical, semipolitical."

Indeed: just like before November 1989 there was a political dimension to the lack of toilet paper, television sets or hygienic pads, there were political aspects to absenteeism, defects. Absence at public rituals such as May 1st was considered a political expression, as was criticism of waste in production or long hair. Drawing attention to bad environment or listening to "objectionable" music also had a touch of protest. All of that was automatically, a priori, ascribed a "political", "anti-socialist" meaning.

In Stalinism, even the *perspectives of civil society* seemed to be imbued with a political dimension.

After all, it was the civil society, human rights and the participation of civic initiatives on the administration of public life, to which most of the dissent related.

Political (both right and left) grouplets were just lingering at the margins. The dominant representative of the dissent was Václav Havel's concept of "apolitical politics", expressed first of all in *The Power of the Powerless* [*Moc bezmocných*]. It was an existential rebellion of the individual against alienated bureaucratic structures and hierarchies, against the "self/movement" of a technocratic and consumerist civilization. Havel rejected a system change (the issue is not a structural problem, but the concrete man) and called for a "negation of the system within ourselves" and "life in truth".

But while the hyperpoliticization produced by Stalinism meant that virtually anything had a political dimension, even Havel's "life in truth", it also meant that in such a framework it was more *difficult* for the proletariat to find a political agenda *of its own* and it was harder for it to recognize which contradictions are specific for it as a social class with "radical chains".⁵⁹

And if the proletariat does not recognize itself as a class of its own with specific interests, it may be drawn into a democratic agenda. Despite the *class* antagonism, which it immediately experiences in everyday life both at work and in society, it may dissolve political in demands of *civil* society for free elections and equality before the law.

Change as a peaceful process: from dialogue to power

Even in a situation where power was lying on the street, an eventual political engagement of the working class in the events was a danger for the leaders of the "Velvet Revolution". The OF displaced and directed the students' movement as a force in motion, but implicitly, it seems, its steps were also intended to prevent a different potential actor (which was reduced to a crowd of extras) to enter the stage: the working class. To refuse to present it with an opportunity to look at the social dynamic from the viewpoint of its *specific* interests and articulate the politically.

One of the most significant characteristics of the OF's strategy was the emphasis on gradual change. From the very beginning, the OF carefully shunned excessive radicalism. When Mandler of the ČSDI⁶⁰ demanded after November 17th immediate resignation of the government, the leading signatory of Charta 77 Vondra reacted in a truly "revolutionary" way: "And who would we negotiate with?" The efforts of OF's representatives to avoid a constitutional crisis at any cost may seem humorous, as far as we look at them as revolutionaries. If, however, we see in them future rulers, who want to avoid unnecessary social turbulences, their care for a gradual, continuous change makes sense.

The initial reluctance of the OF to take power also corresponded to "apolitical politics". As late as on December 1st Havel proclaims: "We supervise power, we are here to guarantee that the power will arrange to implement social ideals, including free elections. But we are not those who want to participate on power. We are always outflanked by that."⁶¹

The vanguard of new power sends forth its representatives to the (Czech) government only three weeks after November 17th – after an insistent plea from

⁵⁹ Karl Marx: *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction.*

⁶⁰ We wrote above that the only real alternative to political steps was the student's movement. Another alternative, unreal, was, at the beginning of November, the marginal ČSDI.

⁶¹ Jiří Suk: *Through the Labyrinth of Revolution [Labyrintem revoluce]*

the Stalinist prime minister! The same day, a radical turn at the nightly meeting of the OF takes place and the opposition decides to send its representatives to the federal government, too.

This substantial change in the attitude had four reasons:

First of all, there was the concern that the federal prime minister Adamec will make a deal with the 68ers of “Obroda” and block off the OF.

Second, the balance of power was changed by the intervention of the Prognostic Institute economists, who brought a strong plan to the OF: Václav Klaus declares that he and his colleague, Vladimír Dlouhý were “just three weeks ago” selected by the “top economists of the world” for a “rescue team” sponsored by the UN, which is supposed to be a “rescue team for Eastern Europe to save the economy of the USSR, Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. (...) So we are looking into it a bit.”

The economists explained these self-confident power ambitions by a concern over the effects of economic reforms already approved by the KSČ, which were supposed to come into effect on January 1st 1990, and also over the mess that a government without OF could make if the opposition would be waiting until the first free elections. “The idea (...) to let the government do whatever they want until the elections,” said



An assembly in Ústí nad Labem in North Bohemia

Klaus, “that must not happen.”⁶² Havel agreed: “Much is at stake, because from January 1st this new mechanism is supposed to exist, and while everyone is saying it can save us, it can also destroy everything (...) Before 1st, real economists should handle it, all the departments”.⁶³

The third strong motive for entering the government was fear of the atmosphere on the street, which kept pushing the opposition to “go for it”. If the Stalinists will not be removed from the government, there will be a threat of “bloodbath, storms, uncontrolled strikes and the OF will be overthrown and there will be no partner to negotiate with them (...) An obscure crisis, spontaneous strike movement, chaos.”⁶⁴

But the point was not just to give the public a signal that the vanguard of change is treading on the heels of KSČ. The OF also had to consider that soon it will be in power itself – and ensure the tamest working class possible. The economists connected to the OF, Havel emphasized at the meeting, “are preparing it all programmatically: How to go about the whole thing and how to calm the workers in Poldovka – and the other big factories – who are afraid there’s gonna be a rise in unemployment. They know exactly what to tell them, that there won’t be no unemployment and so forth. They’re totally prepared for this and we’re agreed that they’ll enter the game at the right moment, when we tell them to.”⁶⁵

If there is a single illustrative moment of November 1989, it is the nightly meeting of the OF, on which the concept of rejecting power ran up against two tough opponents: the economist Václav Klaus of the Prognostic Institute, who insisted that economic reform must begin immediately, and the forger from ČKD, Petr Miller, who warned that “The workers want to get rid of the KSČ!”.

The economists as an ambitious protagonist jostling towards power, the proletariat as a potential *troublemaker* to keep an eye on so that he does not actually cause trouble.

The “end of politics” as a smokescreen

The “apolitical politics” as a specific product of Stalinism had still not said their last word yet when the OF put forth its own people in the government for strategic departmental posts. With the help of the federal prime minister for KSČ, through cabinet plotting and pressure it succeeded in getting the Stalinist parliament to elect Havel for president.

For a long time after that, “apolitical politics” were of indispensable service to the new ruling class. It was a means of ridding proletariat of the ace up its sleeve – of its political autonomy.

⁶² Jiří Suk: *The Civic Forum*, vol. II [Občanské fórum, II. díl]

⁶³ Jiří Suk: *The Civic Forum*, vol. I [Občanské fórum, I. díl]

⁶⁴ Jiří Suk: *Through the Labyrinth of Revolution* [Labyrintem revoluce]

⁶⁵ Jiří Suk: *The Civic Forum*, vol. II [Občanské fórum, II. díl]

Indeed, the ideology of the OF, which dominated the post-November life, was first of all an implicit rejection of Marx's "political power is precisely the official expression of antagonism in civil society".⁶⁶

The creed emanating from the havelist dissident parts of the OF was, paraphrased: The end of politics. Of course, the tensions and contradictions will still exist after the fall of Stalinism, but they will not take a political form. The time of *pragmatic*, non-ideological solving of *particular* problems is coming.

These were not just ideological fantasies floating above the (post-)November reality like some kind of sophistic blabbering, noted only by a bored philosophizing political scientist. The concept of apolitical citizenship as the essence of the *concept of democracy* was then a true material force to a certain extent.

The central slogan of the Civic Forum was "*Parties are for partisans, the OF is for everyone!*", which hung from the buildings everywhere, expressed the essence of "apolitical politics" perfectly and everyone who came in some contact with the events of November understood the message very well: Let us not look at the world politically! We are all in this together, there are no substantial political, party (and, first of all, class) interests, only a myriad of different *particular* problems. In order to solve these, different civic groups and projects centered around this or that problem will have to associate within an open society, only to dissolve into individuals and again reform into new initiatives when solving another problem.⁶⁷

Capitalist society, says the concept of "apolitical politics" (without, of course, using the word "capitalist" back then⁶⁸) knows no substantial, a priori antagonism (*a class antagonism*) running through it and going along with it. Politics are dead, because only ephemeral, *ad hoc* tensions of a *private*, not of *social* character are left.

While communist critique is based on the existence of the collective worker (who is more than just a sum of its parts: it is an organism of social labor built on cooperation under the command of capital), the democratic ideology sees the world

⁶⁶ Karl Marx: *The Poverty of Philosophy*. Political power will disappear after the self-abolition of the proletariat as a class, which will dissolve social classes and their antagonism into a free association of producers.

⁶⁷ Even Petr Uhl – leftwing dissident (who had served 9 years in prison before 1989) who still endorsed Trotskyism at that time, and who was elected an MP for the OF in June 1990 – considered the Czech parliament a special parliament *sui generis*, which differed from the institutions found in classical parliamentary democracies, and thought of the OF as of a basis for territorial and economic self-management. That was not the last time he showed a great deal of political naiveness. (see *A-Kontra*, 1/1993)

⁶⁸ It avoided the word for good reasons: according to a survey from November 23rd – 24th on what course the country should take up next, 45% of Czechoslovaks said „socialist“, 3% „capitalist“, 47% wished for a system „in between“ and 5% could not answer. A survey from December 9th – 12th did not bring much different results: 41% were for the socialist way, 3% for the capitalist one, for a system „in between“ 52%, and 4% could not answer. To the question if privatization should include a) not only restaurants and small workshops, but also big industrial companies and b) big agricultural companies, 8% responded „definitely yes“ (4% in case of big agricultural companies), „rather yes“ 14% (9%), „rather not“ 33% (29%), „definitely not“ 40% (54%), while 5% (4%) could not answer. (Dragoslav Slejška, Jan Herzmann a kol.: *Inquiries into Public Opinion [Sondy do veřejného mínění]*)

in an opposite way. It only sees the separated, isolated individual: it sees the owner of one vote, the owner of an individual work contract, signed by an individual capitalist with an individual worker⁶⁹, the poor citizen as an individual seller of labor force looking for buyer of his commodity...

The events of November got the name “Velvet Revolution”, but their real symbol was the civic tricolor.

After all, the putative “end” of politics is evident in how harshly the OF treated the political groupings brought forth by the dissent, left and right. They were already pushed into the background by the dissent and during November they were held outside of the important events by the OF (under the leadership of the OF, their representatives were *de facto* intentionally displaced into an irrelevant “conceptual commission” in order not to contaminate the *pragmatic* management of the transformation from Stalinism with their *politicizing* and never-ending disputes).

And what is much more important, the “end of politics” got behind factory gates. “Driving politics out of factories, that was the trend of the day. That’s what I remember from November the most,” told us one of the contemporaries in an interview. But wasn’t that just an attack of the OF against the political presence of Stalinists in factories? In the first place, it certainly was: When strike committees started to form in the factories, the OF called for them to transform into Civic Forums and that way *de facto* copied the strategy of company base organizations of the Stalinist competitor. After the general strike, however, the political significance of the company cells – committees or OF branches – fell. And in no way can we speak of them as elementary embryonic forms of political organs of the class. In spring 1990, the strike committees transform into unions. Stalinist politics were finally driven out of the factories, to be replaced by no other – only the unions remained. They, too, as a representative of the collective labor-power were limited to a very submissive position, though. The ruling class did the most to establish the impression of workplaces as points of *private* selling of labor-power.

On top of all that, just as during all of November 1989, great attention was paid to symbols. It was no coincidence that Václav Havel insisted on nominating Petr Miller into the government. That was, of course, a signal: Why even think of some specific interests of the working class, if a forger who just four days ago still operated a lathe is among the new ministers?

The “apolitical politics”, the pathetic words on responsibility and morality, reassuring that “there will be no unemployment”, were just one of the ingredients of the November alchemist cuisine, though. They served the new ruling class above all as a *smokescreen*, which covered the proletariat’s view of a very political workshop, in which the economic transformation was being prepared.

⁶⁹ The ideology of citizenship does not see the relationship collective worker – capital. It only admits the existence of the relation individual worker – individual capitalist.

This transformation, however, was no longer governed by the figures of dissent, but by economic experts coming out of a pre-November milieu. Later on, former Stalinist managers and bankers participated very deftly in their scenario. Economics was an area that the dissent never really mastered – for understandable reasons. The dissent was not equipped for economic issues, but it was not even needed. What the dissent aimed at was done in a much better way by economic experts of official institutions, because they had *better* access to information, statistics, newest economic analyses...⁷⁰ The idea that somewhere in a forgotten academic office before November, there were people working on an authentic analysis of the state of human rights in the ČSSR or analyzing possible ways of developing the non-profit sector, is bizarre, of course. But the economic experts were relatively undisturbed in their work on transformation in Poland or privatization in Latin America...

It is of great significance that the structures of the official milieu of the Stalinist state were much better prepared for formulating an economic plan after the fall of Stalinism than the dissidents or anyone else.

The point is not a populist emphasis on personal continuity between the establishment of pre-November Czechoslovakia and the post-November one. Much more important is the *continuity of needs and tendencies of the economy* – and precisely this element is the link between Stalinist economy and the recomposition of capital and class, which took place after November 1989.

This question, too, will be a subject of a publication we are planning.

⁷⁰ See the interview with Petr Pithart: *The gray zone was ready, the chartists not so* [Sedá zóna byla připravena, chartisté ne], *Lidové noviny*, November 16th 2004.

IV. By way of conclusion

■ November 1989 was the expression of a growing crisis of the Soviet bloc (what took several years in Poland and several months in Hungary, took in East Germany and Czechoslovakia only a few weeks), the weakness of the ruling class in Czechoslovakia, as well as the weakness of the Soviet Union in keeping its role of an Eastern European hegemon.

■ November 1989 was the finalization of 1968, in two aspects. First of all: if 1968 was in Czechoslovakia, against all nostalgia of the local “radical” left, a step towards greater autonomy of individual capitals and greater power of their functionaries (“holders”, managers), then November finalized this step and dissolved the limits imposed on capitals by the state before 1989.

Second, if 1968 was mostly a struggle for democracy and civic rights, November was a *transition* to a developed, modern civic democracy with a colorful network of civil society, which can integrate proletariat more effectively (but *never* absolutely!) than the rigid Stalinist regime.

■ In the absence of a civil society in November 1989, its substitute was the OF. That way, already in the days of November, it represented the *danger* that the concept of citizenship poses to proletariat.

In the circumstances of 1989 the class could not base its activity upon the antagonism that is the only one *specific* to it – class antagonism. The successful strategy of OF took care of dissolving the potentially subversive, political face of the proletariat in the concept of citizenship and democratic rights.

When we say that the true symbol of the “Velvet Revolution” was the civic tricolor, we should add that the tricolor is always a symbol of the state and the ruling class.

■ If today we sigh over the low mobilization of our class, we should know that the cause also partly lie in the *events of November* twenty years ago, when the class could on exploit the relatively open game and could not intervene in it as a politically independent force.

Class struggle as the relation of two moments, proletariat and capital, is not fixed, static. Both its elements have tendency to dominate over the other. If one of them does not occupy the space offered by the situation, it *will not stay vacant* – it will be occupied by the enemy. The balance of power will never remain the same: the position of the passive agent is weakened to the benefit of the active opponent.

The class did not touch upon its own political agenda and destructive potential and it did not create even embryonic forms of its political organs able to deepen its consciousness and struggle. This left marks on its future shape: more easily it succumbed in the nineties to competition on the labor market and ideology of “tightening the belts” (which was nothing else than a *rendezvous* of civic, “apolitical” politics and the dictatorial logic of capital!).

If we, as a class, do not use the chances offered by a given moment, it is a defeat which we have to bear consequences of in the future – that is one of the lessons of November 1989. (After all, there is a more recent example at hand: today the class is the less able to counter the bosses' attacks, the less it was able to use in its benefit the situation of the earlier times, which was favorable due to lack of workforce.)

- But if our critique would remain limited to saying that the proletariat could not act as a political agent in the days of November, it would be incomplete and agnostic as to why that happened. The ability of the class to organize itself and act as a true protagonist had been paralyzed by Stalinism. That is another lesson: statism, no matter if it is supported by Stalinist, Trotskyists or Social-Democrats, is a weapon against working-class autonomy.

- The proletariat is not just an abstract category; it has its concrete trajectory, which is not continuous, however (just as class struggle is not linear).

This has to do with the fundamental difference between the dominant and the dominated class.

While the dominant class, having the whole society and the conquests of collective intellect at its disposal, can accumulate knowledge of class struggle and use it for *permanent* perfection of its rule (through either integration or repression of the proletariat), the working class is losing on this front. Not only its struggle is non-linear, it does not even take up the point it once had reached in order to transcend it and gradually move the base on and on. Moreover, the working class is not able to use its struggles so that the experience and knowledge continuously enrich its “weaponry”. Too often it repeats the same mistakes, falls for the same tricks of capital and ponders the same questions – or, more precisely, *keeps forgetting the partial answers* that had already been sketched by previous struggles.

The constant reality of the proletariat is discontinuity.

One of the challenges it is therefore facing is the development of an adequate theory that would be able to provide the critique and lessons of previous struggles to the future ones. Accumulate experience, positive and negative, gathered on this trajectory, “read them” with marxism as a method, abstract theory from them and criticize the limits of our class – those are some of the goals of a communist organization.

This brochure has no other ambitions than to be a contribution to the collective memory of the working class.

Its limits were mentioned in the introduction. We will try to remedy them in a text focused on the economic nature of ČSSR and the economic transformation after 1989.

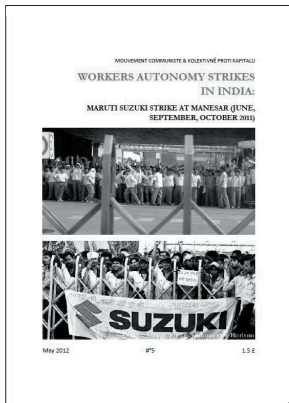
If this brochure will lead to reactions that could enrich the picture of November 1989 and make possible a follow-up to this text, amended by more a concrete view of workplaces in Bohemia and Slovakia, it will fulfill its purpose.

Sources and acknowledgements

The best analysis of OF's strategy, the difficulties of its negotiations with power and problems of its inner operation is Jiří Suk's book, Through the Labyrinth of Revolution [Labyrintem revoluce].

As far as the events of November in regions, as well as the activity of the working class are concerned, the literature is desperately scarce – as if this absence of witnesses from workplaces reflected the thesis that working class was not at the center of November 1989. One of the few exceptions is the subtle brochure by Miroslav Anton, November 1989 in Pilsen [Listopad 1989 v Plzni], which at least marginally treats the Škoda factory in Pilsen.

Therefore we tried to base our research on interviews with contemporaries whenever possible, although it is difficult to generalize their testimonies. We thank them for their goodwill, testimonies and opinions, just as we thank our comrades of Mouvement Communiste for inspiring questions.



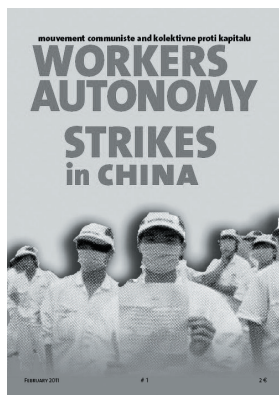
Workers autonomy strikes in India: Maruti Suzuki strike in Manesar [English, French]

An analysis of the Maruti Suzuki strike in June, September and October 2011, and suggestions on a way forward based on engaging in workers militant inquiry. (KPK/MC)



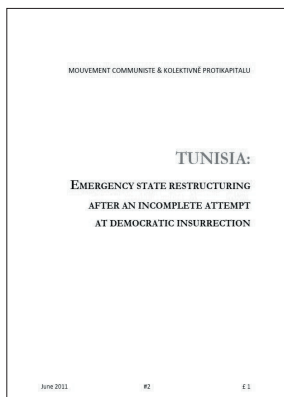
State fiscal crisis and the Greek example [Czech, English, French]

An attempt to explain the causes and consequences of the eurozone states fiscal crisis and to illustrate it through the Greek example. With more general theoretical introduction about nature of capitalist crisis. Written in December 2011. (KPK/MC)

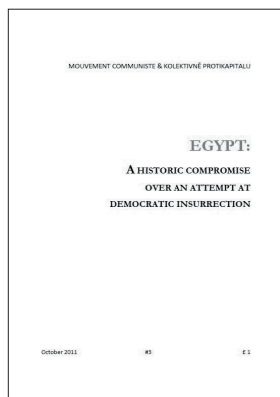


Workers autonomy strikes in China [Czech, English, French]

A pamphlet about the wave of strikes that swept the industrialised coast of China in the summer of 2010. (KPK/MC)



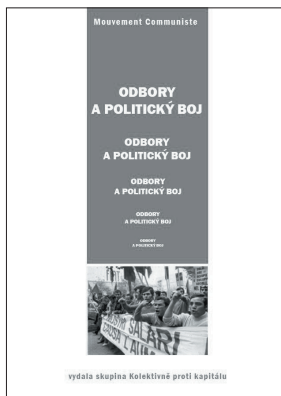
Tunisia: Emergency state restructuring after an incomplete attempt at democratic insurrection [English, French]
A pamphlet about unrest in Tunisia at the beginning of 2011 (KPK/MC)



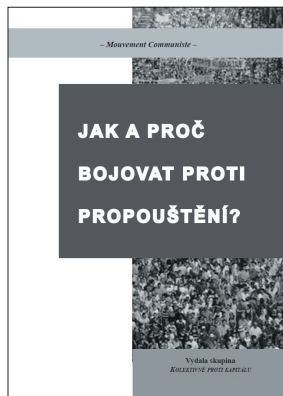
Egypt: a historic compromise over an attempt at democratic insurrection [Czech, English, French]
A pamphlet about the unrest in Egypt in 2011 (KPK/MC)



Greece: The fiscal crisis of the state puts the need for an independent workers' politics on the agenda [Czech, English, French]
The pamphlet collects articles written throughout 2010 on the economic crisis in Greece, the state's austerity agenda, and the response to it by the working class. (MC)



Unions and political struggle [Czech, English, French]
An analysis of trade unions based on Marx's critique of political economy and rejecting the separation between economic and political moments of the class struggle. (MC)



How and why should we fight against redundancies? [Czech, English, French]
Text summarising some general arguments concerning redundancies and some historical experiences of struggles against them in France. (MC)

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The working class did not assert itself in November 1989 as an independent political force. This had its reasons. Stalinism was extremely successful in terms of demobilizing workers. For its part, the vanguard of the “Velvet Revolution”, the Civic Forum, prevented the proletariat from finding its subversive, political face during November. Under its leadership, the working class became imprisoned by the concept of “citizenship”. The real symbol of the handing over of power in November was not velvet, but the civic tricolor.

And the fact that the working-class passed on this opportunity and did not manage, in the relatively open situation of November 1989, to enter the scene as an autonomous agent, was later reflected in the passivity of the class in the years after 1989.