

## THE WORKERS' COUNCILS OF GREATER BUDAPEST\*

by Bill Lomax

'We may not be able to hold out for long, so let us do such things during our brief tenure of power that the working classes of the world will remember them for ever.'

*V.I. Lenin, October 1917*

With the second Soviet intervention of 4th November the first phase of the Hungarian revolution was brought to a sudden and violent end. The Government of Imre Nagy collapsed, and he and his leading supporters sought refuge in the Yugoslav Embassy. The leaders and spokesmen of the various political parties disappeared from the scene even more quickly than they had arrived upon it. The armed forces of the revolution put up a last ditch defence in both the towns and the countryside, but soon they were either defeated or forced to flee to the West. The revolution, however, was yet far from over. Instead it was to develop into a new phase, a phase in which the leading role was to be taken by the Hungarian working class.

Unable to keep up armed resistance in the face of overwhelming military supremacy, the workers of Hungary now turned to the most basic and traditional weapon of the working class—to a general strike which was to become one of the most total and united in the whole history of the world working class movement. Their strike was even to lead one Western academic to remark that:

'This was the first time in history that the syndicalist myth of the revolutionary general strike. . . actually became the basis of sustained political action by the entire industrial population of a country.'<sup>1</sup>

The strike, lasting for well over a month, was in its very essence a political strike, employed as a weapon against both the Soviet military occupation and the new Kádár regime. It demonstrated that despite the paper existence of the Kádár Government, despite the very concrete existence of the Soviet armed forces, power in Hungary remained where it

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\*This essay is a chapter from Bill Lomax's forthcoming book *Hungary 1956*, to be published in the autumn of 1976 by Allison and Busby.

had been ever since the 23rd of October—in the hands of the ordinary people, and first and foremost in the hands of the workers.

In the following weeks, the power of the working class was to achieve an even greater strengthening and consolidation. In its beginnings, the strike had been an instinctive reaction of the working class, completely spontaneous and neither centrally directed nor organised. Having realised their power, however, the workers were to proceed to consolidate and organise it in a revolutionary structure of workers' councils set up at the level of the factory, the district, the city and eventually the country itself.

Thus while the Soviet military intervention had crushed overnight the purely political achievements of the revolution, it led at the same time to the consolidation and strengthening of the real social base of the revolution. In the weeks which followed 4th November, the Hungarian workers were to seize the opportunity and to establish a revolutionary structure of workers' councils which would ensure that power remained in the hands of the working people themselves.

### *The workers' resistance*

When Janos **Kádár** announced the formation of his **Revolutionary Worker-Peasant Government** on 4th November at the same time as the Russians launched their second armed invasion of Hungary, it was the committed Hungarian socialists, and the Hungarian working class, who turned most strongly against him. And it was in the working class districts of Budapest, and in the industrial centres of the countryside, that the Soviet forces were to meet with the strongest resistance.

On the 5th of November, Radio **Rajk** issued an appeal to resistance, declaring: 'Comrades! The place of every true Hungarian Communist today is on the barricades!' On the 7th of November, the huge iron and steel complex of the workers' council of Dunapentele, formerly Stalinvaros, the great new industrial city built under the Communist regime, announced that it was being attacked from all sides by Soviet forces:

**'Dunapentele is the leading socialist town in Hungary. In this town all the inhabitants are working and they hold the power in their hands.**

**... The population of the town is under arms... they will not give in because they have erected the factories and homes of the town with their own hands.**

**... The workers will defend the town against fascism—but also against the Soviet troops.<sup>12</sup>**

A week later it was the turn of the workers' council of Ozd, an industrial centre in North-East Hungary, to defiantly reject the appeal of **Kádár's** Government for the support of the Hungarian workers:

'No! The working class let Kádár and his colleagues know, that they will never under any circumstances work together with traitors.

The workers from Ozd, Diosgyor, Kazinbarcika, Borsodnadas and Salgotarjan, the miners of the coalfields of Borsod and Ozd stand firm and united against Kádár and Co!.<sup>3</sup>

Similar rebuttals were received by the Kádár regime from all the leading working class centres of the country. The greatest armed resistance of the Soviet forces also occurred in the large iron and steel centres of Dunapentele, Ozd and Miskolo, and in the mining regions of Borsod, Dorog, Tatabánya and Pecs.

In Budapest itself, the Soviet military authorities had to concentrate their heaviest armoured units on the workers' suburbs of Kobanya and Csepel, where the workers had occupied their factories and continued to defend them for several days against the Soviet tanks. One writer claims that hospital figures show that 80-90% of the wounded were young workers, while the Kádár regime's own reports show that the greatest damage to buildings and the greatest number of deaths occurred in the predominantly working class districts of the city. The stately villas and gardened houses of the fashionable middle class districts on the slopes of the Buda hills were hardly touched by the fighting.<sup>4</sup>

The major organised centres of resistance in Budapest—the Kilian barracks and the Corvin cinema, the citadel on the Gellert hill and the Buda castle, as well as such prominent intersections as the Moricz Zsigmond, Szena and Marx Squares—were the first targets of the Soviet assault, but even so they were not put out of action until the 6th or 7th of November after three days and nights of heavy fighting. In the outlying districts of Ujpest and Kobanya fighting continued for a few days more. 'Red Csepel' was the last workers' district to fall but then only when, having put down resistance in the rest of the city, the Soviets could move all their major units against Csepel on the 10th and 11th of November.

The military defeat of the workers, however, by no means assured the immediate victory of the new authorities for the workers still held the trump card—their control over production. Following the Soviet occupation, the workers were to refuse to return to work, and in the course of the ensuing general strike, to organise themselves in workers' councils at factory, district, city, and eventually national level. Through the strike and the workers' councils, they were to carry on the struggle of the revolution and to withstand for several weeks the counter-revolutionary assault of both the Kádár regime and the Soviet authorities.

### *The development of district workers' councils*

Those workers' councils which had been in an active stage of development prior to the 4th of November were also the first to reorganise as the

fighting died down. They were also the first to realise that to defend the achievements of the revolution they would have to cooperate with one another and coordinate their activities. With this aim in view, the workers' councils of the larger factories took the lead in setting up district workers' councils in their local neighbourhoods. The first of these was probably that in the Kellenfold district of Budapest, where the lead was taken by the workers of the Beloiannis electrical equipment factory. As early as the 8th of November, a delegation from this district workers' council was even received by General Grebennik, the **Commander-in-Chief** of the occupying Soviet forces.

The Ganz electrical works in Csepel took a similar lead in the creation of a Csepel Workers' Council, which also sent delegations both to the Soviet Commander and to **Kádár**. Between the 8th and 12th of November, further local workers' councils were established in the districts of Kispest, Zuglo, Obuda, Angyalfold and Ujpest.

In slight contrast to the factory workers' councils, whose major task had been to take over the management of their enterprises, these district workers' councils were from the start essentially political organs. They saw their role as to defend what they could of the 'achievements of the revolution, and to represent the interests of the workers vis-a-vis the **Kádár** Government and the Soviet military authorities. Uniting their common stand, however, was the demand that the factories should be the common property of those who worked in them, that production should be managed by the democratically elected organs of the workers themselves, by the workers' councils,

The first statement of the political demands of the workers to be made after the 4th of November was put forward in a resolution of delegates from workers' councils of the Kellenfold district at a meeting on the 12th of November. This resolution declared the readiness of the workers to return to work and to negotiate with the **Kádár** regime, on condition that certain of their political demands were met. In the forefront of these demands stood the immediate release of Imre Nagy and his supporters, an **immediate** cease-fire, and a commitment to the withdrawal of the Soviet troops and the holding of free and democratic elections. At the same time, the workers emphasised that the factories and the land must remain in the hands of the working people, and called for the enlargement and strengthening of the power and authority of the workers' **councils**.<sup>5</sup>

### *The creation of the Central Workers' Council*

It was also on the 12th of November, at a meeting of the Revolutionary Workers' Council of **Ujpest**, that the first move was made towards the creation of a central body to coordinate the activities of workers' councils throughout the whole of Budapest. The meeting was also attended by workers' delegates from the **neighbouring** district of Angyalfold, and by a

few students and young intellectuals.

It was a young Budapest intellectual, **Miklos Krasso**, who called upon the **Ujpest** workers' council to take the lead in issuing an appeal for the formation of a central workers' council which would represent the workers of the whole of Budapest, and be able to negotiate in their name directly with the **Kádár** regime and the Soviet authorities. The suggestion received support from the older workers present, and the workers' council agreed to call upon other workers' councils throughout the city to send delegates to a meeting in the town hall of Ujpest the following afternoon in order to set up a central workers' council.<sup>6</sup>

The students attending the meeting agreed to arrange for the duplication of the appeal, and its distribution throughout the city. Indeed, two of those present left the Ujpest meeting to proceed directly to the district workers' councils in Csepel and Kellenfold.

However, on the morning of the 13th of November, several members of the Ujpest workers' council were arrested, and delegates arriving for the meeting to set up a central council found the town hall of Ujpest surrounded by Soviet tanks. Many of them, nevertheless, were directed to the nearby United Lamp Factory, *Egyesult Izzo*, but since many of the districts and large factories were not represented there, it was decided to put off the founding meeting of the central council until the following day.

This is how it came about that on the afternoon of 14th November, the founding meeting of the Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest finally took place in the *Egyesult Izzo* factory in Ujpest. Some fifty delegates were present, representing all the major factories and districts of Budapest. Delegates also attended from the provincial centres of Miskolc and Győr.

Some confusion now arose from the fact that the proceedings were not presided over by the members of the Ujpest workers' council who had originally convened the meeting, but by the leaders of the workers' council of the *Egyesult Izzo* factory in their capacity as hosts. Consequently, when the young intellectual who had originally proposed the creation of a central workers' council two days earlier arose to expand on his ideas, he was pulled up short by those now present who argued that they had not come to be lectured to, least of all by someone who was neither a worker nor a representative of any workers' organisation. Then, while a lively debate ensued in which the workers' delegates were quite clear and united in their political demands and in their **will** to create a central organisation, they were vague and unsure as to the form of organisation they required, and the strategy to adopt for the realisation of their demands.

It was **Sandor Bali**, a delegate of the Beloiannis electrical equipment factory, who was the first to impose any real direction on the meeting. **Bali** argued that the workers' councils should not recognise the **Kádár**

Government, but that they should be prepared to parley and negotiate with it. With this aim in view, he proposed the creation of a central workers' council which, at the same time as giving overall direction to the general strike, would be able to represent the demands of the workers and win concessions from the **Kádár** Government.

**Bali's** proposal was accepted by the meeting, which declared the establishment of the Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest with the authority to negotiate in the name of the workers of all the factories of Budapest. The meeting also called for the election of district workers' councils throughout the city, and for new elections to the factory workers' councils as soon as possible. Finally, the meeting passed a resolution which declared the workers' loyalty to the principles of socialism and their determination to defend the collective ownership of the means of production. The resolution went on to **outline** the workers' political demands which included a general amnesty, a Government under Imre **Nagy**, the withdrawal of the Soviet troops and the abolition of the one-party system. Until these demands were met, they declared, the general strike would continue.'

### *The Composition and Organisation of the Central Workers' Council*

The delegates to the founding meeting of the Central Workers' Council made up an interesting selection of workers from the major local districts and the larger factories of Budapest. Many of them were long-standing members of the working class movement, with past political experience in either the Social Democratic or the Communist **Party**, and often both. Several of the older workers had also been active in the militant pre-war Metalworkers' Union. At the same time, the meeting was remarkable for the strong representation of young workers, almost a half of the delegates belonging to the age group 23 to 28. These younger workers added enthusiasm and dynamism to the experience and responsibility of the older delegates. There was also, within both age groups, a very strong representation of skilled workers—engineers, metalworkers, toolmakers and electricians. A number of students and young **intellectuals** also attended the meeting as **observers**.

Following the debate and the decision to set up the Central Workers' Council, it became increasingly clear that some more formal structure was necessary to give order and direction to the proceedings. Consequently, the meeting elected a provisional committee of some twenty-odd **members**, whom it authorised to draw up a more orderly and precise programme of action. Amongst the members of this provisional committee were to be found most of those who were subsequently to become the effective leaders of the Central Workers' Council. Though the exact composition of this committee has never actually been documented, we do know the identity of a good half of its members, who may not be unrepresentative

of the body as a whole. They included:

<b>Istvan Babay:</b>	Delegate of the Municipal Company of Tramways.
<b>Arpad Balazs:</b>	Delegate from <b>Ujpest</b> , and a worker in the mining machinery factory.
<b>Jozsef Balazs:</b>	Delegate from <b>Angyalfold</b> , and a turner in the steel works <b>Magyar Aczel</b> . Veteran of the Metalworkers' Union, and Communist Party member since 1945.
<b>Sandor Balazs:</b>	Delegate of <b>Egyesult Izzo</b> , toolmaker and veteran of the Metalworkers' Union.
<b>Sandor Bali:</b>	Delegate of the Beloianis factory and the <b>Kellenfold</b> district. A <b>40-year</b> old toolmaker, veteran of the Metalworkers' Union, member of the Social Democratic Party before the war and of the Communist Party since 1945.
<b>Jozsef Devenyi:</b>	Delegate of the workers' council of the Csepel iron and steel works.
Gyorgy <b>Kalocsai:</b>	Delegate from Csepel, and a 32-year old chemical engineer in the Vegetable Oil Factory.
<b>Sandor Karsai:</b>	Delegate from Kobanya, and a 26-year old metal engineer in a factory producing radiators.
<b>Miklos Sebestyen:</b>	Delegate of the Hungarian Optical Works, and a 26-year old metallurgist.
Ferenc Toke:	Delegate from <b>Zuglo</b> , and of the workers' council of the Telephone Apparatus Factory. A 26-year old toolmaker, and former member of the Social Democratic Party.

From the very start, the most prominent of these individuals was **Sandor Bali** who had given both drive and direction to the creation of the Central Workers' Council. It was also he who was to provide the larger political conceptions within the framework of which the Central Workers' Council was to develop and organise. Characteristic of his personal honesty and socialist spirit, despite being an active member of the Communist Party since 1945 and a more than able toolmaker, he had remained amongst the workers on the shopfloor when many others were seeking positions of management and privilege. Now too, though the undisputed driving spirit of the Central Council and frequently its most prominent spokesman, he was content to remain in the position of a simple member.

Shortly to achieve an equal prominence to that of **Sandor Bali** was **Sandor Racz**, another toolmaker at the Beloianis factory and the president of its workers' council. Only twenty three years old, **Sandor Racz** was the most active representative of the younger workers, and a man whose character combined profound sincerity with both dynamism and determination. Somewhat more militant than **Sandor Bali**, he was a vocal advocate of the creation of a national workers' council, and was later to be

elected president of the Central Workers' Council.

Elected secretary of the Central Workers' Council was Istvan Babay, a delegate of the Company of Tramways. The Council's headquarters were shortly to be moved to the city centre offices of the Company of Tramways, and Istvan Babay was to perform the day to day administrative tasks involved in running the Council.

**Sandor** Karsai, a young fitter who had worked his way up to become a metal engineer at a factory producing radiators in Kobanya, was very popular with the workers and became head of the political commission of the Central Council. He had insisted from the start on the importance of formulating a long-term perspective for the workers' councils, and of clarifying their proper role within the economic and political system.

Two other members of the provisional committee, Miklos Sebestyen and Ferenc Toke, are also worthy of special note since they have both subsequently provided accounts of the activities of the Central Workers' Council. Miklos Sebestyen, a young engineer who had learned a number of Western languages, became head of the Council's press commission and assumed responsibility both for holding press conferences for foreign journalists, and for producing the Council's information bulletin. Ferenc Toke, a young worker who had attended evening classes at the Technological University where he had come into contact with the students' movement, was made responsible for organisational matters.

Besides those already mentioned, amongst others who joined later in the work of the Central Council was Lajos Varga, a worker from the workers' council of the Zuglo district who could speak Russian, and who took charge of the Council's relations with the Soviet military command.

The plenary meeting of the Central Workers' Council, however, was not a permanent body but a delegate assembly, made up of two representatives from each of the district workers' councils of Greater Budapest. Consequently, the delegates attending its different meetings were not necessarily always the same people. At first the only appointed official was the secretary, Istvan Babay, and members of the Council took it in turn to preside over its meetings. This arrangement, however, proved to present a number of problems, and eventually **Sandor** Racz was to be appointed as a permanent president, with Gyorgy Kalocsai as vice-president.

The Central Workers' Council also set up a secretariat with seven commissions for the supervision of particular fields of its activities. Their heads were **Sandor** Racz, **Sandor** Bali, Gyorgy Kalocsai, **Sandor** Karsai, Istvan Babay, Miklos Sebestyen and Ferenc Toke. Since they included the three permanent officials of the Central Council, it is obvious that these seven constituted the effective leadership or working executive of the Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Strike Issue*

Having created a working executive and prepared a platform of political demands, the Central Workers' Council appointed a 19-man delegation under the leadership of a Csepel delegate, Jozsef Devenyi, to present the demands of the workers of Budapest to the **Kádár** Government. This delegation met with **Kádár** in the parliament building on the evening of 14th November.

**Kádár**, in a most remarkable speech, declared his agreement in principle with most of the demands of the delegation, namely in regard to Imre **Nagy's** participation in the Government, to democratic elections with several political parties, and to the eventual withdrawal of the Soviet troops. In the same breath, however, he argued that these demands could not be met immediately under the prevailing circumstances, and while calling upon the workers to first return to work, he offered no guarantee that their demands would be implemented. Thus, while appearing conciliatory, **Kádár** did not in fact give way on a single point. Consequently, the Central Council delegates felt that they could not make any concessions either, and the meeting broke up with no obvious results or **achievements**.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, the initial informality of both the structure and proceedings of the Central Workers' Council was giving rise to a number of problems. At first the Council had no permanent chairman or president, or even officially appointed spokesman. Rather, the first meeting had been chaired by an **Ujpest** delegate, Arpad Balazs, and he was then mandated to act as spokesman to make known the Central Council's standpoint to the public. Arpad Balazs, however, used the opportunity to issue a radio appeal that same evening, 14th November, calling for an unconditional return to work in the name of the Central Workers' Council. Learning of his action, other members of the Council concluded that he was a Government agent who had infiltrated the Council, and he was removed from its membership.

Arpad Balazs was then replaced by Jozsef Devenyi, who had led the delegation to **Kádár** on 14th November, but in subsequent days he too took up an almost equally equivocal attitude towards the strike, and generally acted in a rather indecisive manner. Consequently he soon came to be regarded as an opportunist who was inclined to compromise with the **Kádár** regime, and he too was removed from the Central Council. The situation was eventually resolved by the election of the more militant and combative **Sandor** Racz as a permanent president of the Central Council.

Meanwhile, the debate continued within the Central Council over the attitude to adopt towards the **Kádár** Government and towards the continuation of the strike. The Central Workers' Council had now moved its headquarters to the offices of the Municipal Company of Tramways in central Budapest, and a second meeting was held there on the 15th of November which was considerably more representative of the workers of the whole of Budapest. More district workers' councils had sent their

delegates to this meeting, while a meeting of delegates from the workers' councils of another twenty-five large factories had also voted to join forces with the Central Workers' Council. Several delegates from workers' **councils** in the provinces also took **part** in this session.

The main issue before the meeting arose from the failure of the meeting with **Kádár**. While some delegates called for outright opposition to the new authorities—'We have no need of the Government! We are and shall remain the leaders here in Hungary!' declared **Sandor Racz**—the majority of delegates favoured seeking a compromise settlement with the Government. It was **Sandor Bali** who proposed that while refusing to grant *de jure* recognition to the **Kádár** Government, they should not hold back from establishing a *de facto* relationship with it.

The central question, however, remained that of the strike. A number of delegations, most notably those from Csepel and Győr, favoured an unconditional return to work designed to give the Government time to prove the sincerity of its intentions. Others, in contrast, argued for a total and resolute strike, refusing all offers of compromise and holding out for the full implementation of their demands. Once again, **Sandor Bali** won support for a policy of moderation. The country, he declared, was in a condition of severe devastation, and the workers' councils had no reserves to draw on for a long strike. In this situation, he suggested, the workers should offer to return to work in return for substantial concessions from the **Kádár** Government. Moreover, by such action they could demonstrate that the strike was not just a spontaneous and unorganised reaction of the workers, but an organised and formidable weapon consciously directed for the implementation of the workers' demands.

A new delegation was formed and sent again to **Kádár** in a deliberate spirit of conciliation. However, this delegation met with just the same rebuttal as the earlier one. While **Kádár** appealed to the Central Workers' Council to call off the strike, he would not, or could not, offer any guarantees for the satisfaction of their demands.

Nevertheless, pressures for a return to work were building up throughout the city. As the bitter Hungarian winter approached, the general strike came to be seen as a lethal weapon to those who used it as well as to those against whom it was directed. On the 15th of November, the Central Workers' Council of Csepel had called for a return to work. The next day, the Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest followed suit, and agreed to call for the resumption of work throughout the city on Monday, 19th November. At the same time, they insisted that they were not abandoning any of the popular demands of the revolution.

Not everyone, however, was happy with the decision to call off the strike. Far from having been pressganged into going on strike by the Central Workers' Council, as the **Kádár** regime tried to make out, many of the workers were bitterly opposed to the return to work, and felt that the

Central Council had betrayed the strikers. Indeed, some members of the Central Council were almost beaten up by angry crowds of workers protesting outside the Council's headquarters. When other delegates arrived later from the countryside, several of them turned angrily on the leaders of the Central Council, 'calling us all possible names: scoundrels, traitors, etc.'<sup>10</sup>

### *Relations with the Soviet Military Command*

Besides attempting to negotiate with the **Kádár** Government, the Central Workers' Council also entered into direct contact with the Soviet military authorities under the command of General Grebennik. The first contacts were made in an effort to prevent deportations, and to secure the release of Hungarians arrested by the Russians. An agreement was reached whereby the Central Workers' Council presented the Soviet military command each day with a list of missing workers' council members, and the Russians then saw to their release from prison. The workers' councils also acted as intermediaries in the distribution of provisions and medical supplies to the population.

In these arrangements, the Soviet command dealt directly with the Central Workers' Council, completely over the heads of the **Kádár** Government, and in so doing effectively recognised the Central Council as the representative organ of the Hungarian workers. Indeed, each member of the Central Council was even issued with a special Soviet pass authorising the bearer to travel freely after curfew, as well as a permit to carry arms.

At first, representatives of the Central Council would go to the Soviet military headquarters for talks, but later on Soviet officers were sent to attend the sessions of the Central Council. Eventually the Russians actually delegated a Soviet colonel with an interpreter as a permanent representative to the Central Workers' Council, and on one occasion a group of Soviet officers accepted an invitation to visit a local factory and hear the Hungarian workers express their views.

On the whole, the Soviet representatives acted very correctly and with apparent sympathy for the workers' councils. Most reports, however, suggest that they were somewhat confused as to just what role the workers' councils were seeking to perform, and it is very probable that their conciliatory attitude had been ordered from above. Certainly their attitude was quick to change at the beginning of December when General Grebennik was recalled to Moscow and replaced by the Russian secret police chief, General Ivan Serov.

### *The National Workers' Council*

Proposals to create a National Workers' Council had been put forward at several meetings of the Central Workers' Council ever since its foundation, but the action had been put off until a meeting could be held of

democratically elected delegates from the workers' councils of the whole country.

A detailed plan for the constitution of a National Council which would serve as a 'Parliament of Workers' Councils' was put before the Central Workers' Council on the 18th of November. The plan proposed the creation of a 156-member assembly of delegates from the workers' councils of the districts of Budapest, and of the counties, as well as from a number of the largest factories. This assembly would elect a 30-member presidium which would have the right to co-opt up to 20 further representatives of the universities, the army, the police, the intellectuals' organisations and the political parties. The Central Workers' Council approved the plan and on the 19th of November issued an appeal to all workers' councils in Hungary to send delegates to a conference in the Budapest sports stadium on 21st November to set up a National Workers' Council. 'The principal task of this national conference', states one of the signatories of the appeal, 'was to create a power under the direction of the workers, and in opposition to the Government.' Invitations to attend the meeting were also issued to both the **Kádár** Government and the Soviet military authorities."

At 8 a.m. on the morning of the **21st** of November it almost looked as though General Grebennik had accepted the invitation to the **conference**—some four hundred Soviet tanks had appeared on the streets, surrounding the sports stadium, and blocking off all the roads leading to it. Delegates arriving for the conference, however, were quietly redirected to the headquarters of the Central Workers' Council in the city centre, where the national conference was able to take place after all, despite the Soviet display of force. Besides the representatives of Budapest, delegates arrived from workers' councils in Győr and Veszprém, Tatabánya, Pécs and **Komló**, Ózd and Salgotarján. There were also a number of peasants' delegations from smaller villages.

Many of these delegates, however, had arrived in an angry mood, believing that the leaders in Budapest had betrayed them by calling off the strike. The miners' delegates from Tatabánya, Pécs and Salgotarján were the most angry and uncompromising. 'You can work if you want,' they declared, '**but** we shall provide neither coal nor electricity, we shall flood all the mines!' The sending of Soviet tanks to prevent the meeting of the national conference showed what one could expect from negotiations with **Kádár**. The only answer to such people, they declared, was to maintain the general strike.

With some difficulty, the leaders of the Central Workers' Council managed to convince the delegates from the provinces that they were not collaborating with the Government, and that a continuation of the strike in Budapest would only cause misery to the population and disorganise the workers' forces. At the same time, the meeting decided not to officially constitute a National Workers' Council for fear that this might serve as a

pretext for the Kádár regime to ban the Central Workers' Council too and clamp down on the workers' councils elsewhere. Nevertheless, the meeting had in fact established the basis for a permanent liaison between the Central Workers' Council and the workers' councils in the provinces, and in this way a National Council had in effect been brought into being. Finally, the meeting issued a proclamation restating the workers' demands and declaring that their full cooperation with the Government could not be assured until their demands were met.

Meanwhile, the news that the sports stadium had been surrounded by Russian tanks had given birth to rumours throughout the city that the national conference had been prevented from meeting and the delegates arrested. Before the national conference had completed its deliberations, the workers had launched a protest strike, and by the time the Central Workers' Council learned about it, the strike was almost total throughout the city. Faced with the reality of the strike, the leaders of the Central Council agreed to give their backing to it, in protest against the attempt to prevent the national conference from meeting. Acting partly in solidarity with the strikers, partly under the pressure of the delegates from the provinces, they declared an official 48-hour protest strike.

#### *From the sports stadium to the parliamentary conference*

From the very beginning, the Central Workers' Council of Csepel had acted in a somewhat independent fashion. They had from the first been opposed to the strike, and in favour of a more trusting attitude towards the Government. At the same time, though, they were just as adamant as the Central Council in Budapest in demanding the withdrawal of Soviet troops and free elections with a plurality of political parties. Equally resolutely, they condemned the attempt to prevent the meeting of the national conference on the 21st of November and the continuing arrests of members of workers' councils.

However, on the 22nd of November, the workers' council of the Csepel iron and steel works went a good step further out of line in condemning the call of the Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest for a 48-hour protest strike. The time for such head-on collisions with the Government had, they declared, passed. Nevertheless, the Csepel workers themselves proved as ready as those in the rest of Budapest to answer the strike call. In view of this situation, the Central Workers' Council decided to send a special three-man commission to Csepel to investigate the local workers' councils' opposition to the strike and to the Central Council. In the following days, however, the workers of Csepel themselves set matters right in new elections to their workers' councils. In these elections those leaders who had opposed the strike, including the former president of the Central Workers' Council of Csepel, lost their positions and were replaced by more militant workers prepared to work in greater solidarity with the Central

Workers' Council of Greater Budapest.

Following the **over-reaction** of the Soviet authorities in sending tanks to prevent the meeting of the national conference on the 21st of November, the Central Workers' Council went out of its way to avoid any action that might be taken as a provocation and prejudice the attempt to reach a compromise settlement with the **Kádár** Government. With such considerations foremost, the Central Council's activity turned increasingly to the organisation of passive resistance. One of the first instances of this was the silent demonstration on the 23rd of November in commemoration of the revolution. The suggestion that **noone** should go out onto the streets of Budapest between 2 and 3 p.m. in the afternoon was put forward by the Revolutionary Council of Intellectuals and taken over by the Central Workers' Council. The call to the people of Budapest was followed un-animously, perhaps particularly so because on this very day came the news of the abduction of Imre Nagy and his companions from the Yugoslav Embassy. The occasion is recalled by an eye-witness:

**'Budapest, in a matter of one second, became a haunted city. Haunted only by the Russian armoured cars driving from one place to the other, but to no avail. The silence was more eloquent than any shot which might have been fired at them.'**

The most significant attempt to reach some form of agreement between the Central Workers' Council and the **Kádár** Government occurred on the 25th of November, when a conference between the two **sides** was held in the parliament building. In speeches to the **workers' leaders**, Janos **Kádár**, Gyorgy Marosan and Antal Apro appealed to the workers' councils to help the Government in the establishment of order and the resumption of production. The workers, **Kádár** argued, were confused and did not know which road to follow. It was the duty of the workers' councils, he continued, to support the Government in leading the workers away from the **counter-revolution**. To this, **Sandor** Bali replied: 'There is no confusion in the spirit of the workers, but rather in yours!'

'You **ruffians!**' exclaimed Marosan in return, 'To think you can give us a lecture! You are prolos indeed! But what have you in common with the **workers?**'<sup>12</sup>

In such an atmosphere, it is hardly surprising that the conference ended without any agreement being achieved, and if anything the two sides moved further apart. Having failed to win the cooperation of the workers' leaders, the Government was increasingly to charge the workers' councils with being unrepresentative of the working class as a whole, and to use force and coercion against them. At the same time, the confrontation hardened the views of the workers' leaders, and strengthened the arguments of those calling upon the Central Workers' Council to act as an independent political force. This standpoint was made clear in a speech to the **con-**

ference by **Sandor** Bali who asserted:

**'It is the Hungarian working class which has set on foot the workers' councils, which for the moment are the economic and political organisations that have behind them the working class.'**

In similar tones, in an appeal to all workers' councils throughout Hungary issued on the 27th of **November**, 'the Central Workers' Council proclaimed:

**'We reaffirm that we have received our mission from the working class.. . and we shall work with all our might for the strengthening of the workers' power.'**

'The time has now come,' recalls Miklos Sebestyen, 'to strengthen the activity of the Central Workers' Council and to assert ourselves as a political force recognised as such by the **people**.'<sup>13</sup>

### *A Workers' Journal*

The last week of November saw increasing efforts by the authorities to misrepresent and undermine the workers' councils. For instance, at the parliamentary conference Gyorgy **Kalocsai** had denounced provocative actions by stalinist elements in the factories, but his speech was reported on the radio as an attack on 'provocative fascist elements'. The Central Workers' Council took even greater exception to the overall picture of the parliamentary conference given by **Kádár** in a radio broadcast on the 26th of November, in which he attacked the workers' councils as counter-revolutionary forces, and said they would either have to support the Government or shut up shop.

The **re-formed** secret police also set to work to undermine the workers' councils, and forged leaflets in the name of the Central Workers' Council calling both for a continuation of the strike and for armed action against the Soviet authorities. These provocations were obviously aimed both at disrupting the unity of the workers' councils, and lending support to allegations that they were instigating counter-revolutionary actions.

In view of these incidents, the Central Workers' Council came to the conclusion that it would have to issue a journal to keep the factories and the country truly informed of its activities. Most of the printing shops, however, were occupied by the Soviet forces, and the Government was adamant in refusing the Central Council any authority to publish its own journal. Despite this, the Central Council set up a press commission under Miklos Sebestyen who got together with a number of young journalists, intellectuals and students to bring out a paper under the simple title of *Munkasujsg* or *Workers' News*. They even arranged with the workers' council of a small printing shop to print the paper without official

authorisation.

The first numbers of the *Workers' News* were already coming off the press, when leading members of the Central Council arrived to announce that the Government had made it known that it would regard such activities as a provocation, and so the Central Council had decided not to go ahead with publication. Instead, they agreed to continue with the duplicated *Information Bulletin* which was already being produced and distributed through the workers' councils.

Despite the step-down by the Central Council, the Hungarian authorities still raided the printing works, seizing the few copies of the *Workers' News* that had been printed, and trying unsuccessfully to arrest Sebestyén. At the same time, the Soviet authorities seized the duplicating machines in a number of large factories, in an attempt to prevent the propagation of the Central Council's bulletin. These actions, however, served only to increase the workers' interest in the *Information Bulletin*, typed copies of which were now passed from hand to hand in the factories, read out to workers' meetings, and relayed to provincial towns over the telephone. At the same time, the Central Workers' Council called upon the workers to boycott the Communist Party daily *Nepszabadsag*, and all other official papers with the exception of the *Sports News*.

### *Battle for control in the factories*

Meetings between the Central Workers' Council and the **Kádár** Government continued almost daily but while **Kádár** continued to express his agreement in principle with the workers' demands, he insisted that in the existing situation the first task had to be the restoration of order, *i.e.* the strengthening of his Government's power. In practice, however, the more the authority of the Government was increased, and the more it sought to restrict the activities and competence of the workers' councils. In this spirit, a decree on the workers' councils was issued on the 22nd of November which sought to restrict their activity to purely economic and not political functions.

At other times **Kádár** seems to have been on the verge of reaching some compromise with the Central Workers' Council, but to have been overruled by the hardliners in the Government and Party leadership. For instance, at one point **Kádár** offered to recognise the Central Workers' Council as a national council of producers which would have a leading role in the administration of the economy, but the decree effecting this proposal was vetoed by the Stalinist members of his Government.

For a time the Government sought to persuade the workers' councils to function within the framework of the official trade unions, but the Central Workers' Council categorically refused even to negotiate with the official trade unions which they regarded as bureaucratic organs of Party control in no way representative of the workers. As **Sandor** Bali explained:

**'We mustn't, indeed we cannot, talk about trade unions until the Hungarian workers have themselves built up their organisations from the base up, and have won back the right to strike.'**

The Central Workers' Council, its leaders explained, was ready and willing to cooperate with independent and democratic trade unions which represented the interests of the workers. To make the unions into such organisations, the Central Council demanded new democratic elections within the trade unions. Such elections had been agreed to before the second Soviet intervention, but after the 4th of November the official union leadership continually postponed the elections, contending that, 'the atmosphere in the factories... was not conducive to the holding of democratic and secret elections.'<sup>14</sup>

The end of November also saw the intensification of conflict at the level of production itself, as the Communist Party attempted to rebuild its organs of control within the factories, to deny the workers' councils the right to appoint and dismiss factory directors, and to reorganise the trade unions and the secret police.

The workers' councils had been unanimous that they would allow no party organisations within the factories, and when Communist Party officials sought to return and re-establish the organisations that had existed before the revolution, many were banned or even physically prevented from entering the factories. With regard to the trade unions, the workers' attitude varied from place to place. Where the unions had remained under the control of former stalinist functionaries, they too were banned from the factories, and the workers demanded that they be represented either by the workers' councils themselves, or by unions independent of party control. In other cases, where local union leaders had supported the revolution and now refused to join Kádár's Communist Party, the unions were able to retain the confidence and support of the workers.

During the revolution or shortly afterwards, a large number of workers' councils had dismissed and replaced their Communist factory directors. Now, however, the Kádár regime declared that it alone, not the workers' councils, had the right to appoint or dismiss leading executives, and sought to re-install those factory directors who had been replaced.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, Kádár had repeatedly asserted that the hated secret police would not be re-formed, and that the workers themselves would be incorporated into the new organs of public security. From the first days of his regime, numerous workers' councils had offered to assist Kádár in his proposal to arm the workers—offering to provide the workers to be armed—but they had been totally ignored, and as the new security force was established it was not units of factory workers' guards but members of the former secret police who provided its mainstay.

In this battle for control of the factories, a battle which was fought for no less than direct control of the means of production, and fought out at the very point of production itself, the workers succeeded for a considerable time in resisting the onslaught of the Party bureaucracy. In the terminology of the latter, 'for several days at the end of November the counter-revolution ruled over a significant proportion of the factories.' But, aware of their structural weaknesses, and their total lack of any base amongst the workers themselves, the Communist authorities came increasingly to use intimidatory and coercive measures against the workers' councils. Verbal attacks on the councils' 'anti-Government policy and anti-Party campaign' were stepped up, and in the first days of December some two hundred members of various workers' councils were arrested.

In this atmosphere of growing repression, calls were increasingly raised for more determined and open resistance to the **Kádár regime**, and for a new general strike. This placed the Central Workers' Council in a somewhat awkward position. While its power was being undermined by the coercive actions of the Government, it was coming under increasing pressure from below to take firmer and more energetic action. While fearing it might lose the confidence of the workers if it did not act strongly enough, it was also aware that almost any action might be considered by the Government as a provocation and an excuse for even more coercive measures.

Meanwhile, proposals were being aired for some action to commemorate the victims of the second Soviet intervention of the 4th of November. One plan which had been drawn up was for a great workers' demonstration through the streets of Budapest on the 4th of December. The Central Workers' Council firmly rejected this idea for fear of bloodshed and further repression, and decided instead on a silent procession of women, dressed in black and carrying flowers, who would march to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Hero's Square. The Central Workers' Council also called upon the rest of the population to demonstrate their solidarity by placing lighted candles in their windows at midnight.

The women's procession took place despite the presence of Soviet tanks and armed troops trying to disperse them, and although the Government had withdrawn all candles from the shops, almost every window of Budapest was lit up that night.

**Kádár** and his Government were evidently outraged by this open flouting of their authority. The Central Workers' Council, they declared, was now 'in the tow of the counter-revolution.' The Central Council's leaders gained the impression that the Government was now preparing for a final blow against them, and in view of their good relationship up till now with the Soviet authorities, they decided to appeal for help to none other than the Soviet Government. A delegation from the Central Workers' Council went to the Soviet military command and asked them to inform the Soviet ambassador that the Central Council would like the **oppor-**

tunity to present its case before representatives of the Soviet Government. They also sent a letter to the Soviet Premier, Bulganin, with a similar request in which they declared that:

'the various measures of the Government... against the revolutionary elements serve only to splinter the best and most progressive forces of socialism in Hungary.'<sup>16</sup>

### *Last Engagements*

In the first weeks of December, faced with increasing attacks from the Government, with many members of workers' councils disappearing daily, and increasing demands from the provinces for action, the Central Workers' Council recognised the necessity, come what may, of calling a further national conference of workers' councils.

A secret and extraordinary session of the Central Workers' Council was held on the 6th of December, at which plans were discussed to create a National Workers' Council with a definite political programme. The proposals envisioned the extension of the Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest into a National Workers' Council with a permanent presidium, secretariat and committee structure. In addition, a provisional Workers' Parliament would be set up, composed of representatives of workers' councils throughout the country, which would replace the National Assembly until the 23rd of October 1957, on which date free national elections would be held between the democratic political parties.

The Central Council also adopted a Memorandum addressed to the Government, in which it protested that while it has been prepared to negotiate with the regime and work for the resumption of production, it had met with only force and intimidation from the authorities. Repeating once again the fundamental demands of the workers' councils, the Central Council demanded a public reply from the Government saying what steps it would take to meet the workers' demands."

Finally, the Central Workers' Council arranged to secretly convene a meeting to create the National Workers' Council on the 9th of December. However, the **Kádár** regime learned of these plans from secret police agents who had infiltrated the Central Council, and in the early hours of the 9th of December the Government arrested a **majority** of the Central Council's members and issued a decree declaring its dissolution.

Nevertheless, several members of the Central Council as well as a number of delegates from provincial towns had already arrived at the headquarters of the Central Council on the evening of the 8th of December. Learning that their plans were about to be forestalled, they went into immediate session. In fact, a member of the Central Council was called to the telephone by a representative of the Government who demanded to know if they really were planning to create a National Council. 'Yes,' he

replied, 'We are already in session. . . We shall continue.'

A few moments later, news came that Soviet troops had opened fire on demonstrating miners in **Salgotarjan**. The atmosphere, related Ferenc Toke, became 'a tempest of indignation.' Without hesitation, the delegates declared a 48-hour protest strike against the terroristic and intimidatory actions of the Government. 'Let the lights go out, let there be no gas, let there be nothing!' declared one delegate. 'Strike till the Spring, or even till our lives end!' called **another**.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the meeting issued a proclamation in support of the strike in which it declared that the **Kádár** Government was no longer capable of resolving the country's troubles, and called upon trade unions throughout the world to hold strikes in solidarity with that of the Hungarian workers.

As already planned, the Government replied to the strike call by outlawing the Central Workers' Council and arresting the majority of its members. Two of its most prominent leaders, **Sandor Racz** and **Sandor Bali**, spent the 9th and 10th of December in the **Beloianis** factory under the protection of the workers, who refused to permit the police to enter and arrest their leaders, even when the factory was menacingly encircled by Soviet tanks. On the morning of the 11th of December, Janos **Kádár** offered a personal invitation to Racz and Bali to meet with him in the parliament for discussions. Racz and Bali accepted **Kádár's** invitation and presented themselves at the parliament, whereupon they were immediately arrested and imprisoned.

The banning of the Central Workers' Council and the imprisonment of its leaders gave an added impetus to the strike of the 11th and 12th of December. As work came to a halt both in Budapest and throughout the country, even the Communist Party's own paper *Nepszabadsag* was to describe the strike as one 'the like of which has never before been seen in the history of the Hungarian workers' movement.' In the course of the two-day protest, demonstrations, disturbances and even armed clashes with the authorities occurred in a number of provincial towns, at Eger, Miskolc, Ozd and Kecskemet.

In reply to the strike, the Government declared a state of emergency and banned all meetings and demonstrations called without official permission. **At** the same time all territorial workers' councils, at district, town, and county level, were declared disbanded. On the 13th of December, the Government issued a further decree establishing detention without trial for up to six months, and setting up special courts of summary jurisdiction throughout the country.

These actions, however, only further increased the antagonism of the working class towards the Government. Straight on the heels of the 48-hour strike, the workers of the Csepel iron and steel works occupied their factory with a sit-in strike, demanding the release of **Sandor Racz** and **Sandor Bali**. Their action was immediately joined by the workers of the

Beloianis factory, and followed by those in at least a dozen more large factories. In counter-action, many of these factories were now occupied by Soviet troops.

The following month saw the last-ditch stand of the workers' councils, operating in semi-legality, to prevent the control of the factories being wrested out of their hands by the Communist Party bureaucracy backed up by the Soviet armed forces. Spasmodic strikes and demonstrations continued to occur throughout the country, and further armed clashes took place between workers and both secret police and Soviet soldiers in the industrial centre of Csepel and in a number of provincial towns. In the face of terror and intimidation, and overwhelming military might, the workers' resistance was courageous but doomed to eventual defeat.

On the 5th of January a new decree reduced even further the legal competence of the workers' councils, and Kádár's Revolutionary Worker-Peasant Government extended the death penalty to striking or inciting to strike. Faced with daily increasing intimidation, on the 8th of January the workers' council of the Csepel iron and steel works announced its resignation, declaring that:

**'Under the presently prevailing circumstances, we are no longer able to carry out our obligations. . . and for this reason, we are returning our mandate into the hands of the workers.'**

Many of the remaining workers' councils followed the lead given by Csepel and announced their own disbandment. The Government responded to what it considered 'the provocative dissolutions of the workers' councils' by increasing the scope of the death penalty to almost any act of criticism. In Csepel itself, Soviet troops sent in to disperse demonstrating workers were again involved in heavy fighting.

On the 15th of January, the Central Workers' Council, still functioning in illegality, issued its final appeal to the workers to keep up their resistance:

**'Because of the terror, however, and the death penalty even for distributing leaflets, the Council exhorts the workers to spread all news concerning the underground by word of mouth. Sabotage and passive resistance are the order of the day.'**<sup>19</sup>

Sabotage and passive resistance, and even the occasional strike and demonstration, continued throughout 1957, but the organised power of the Hungarian workers' councils had now been broken: Finally, on the 17th of November 1957, a Government decree declared the dissolution of all remaining workers' councils.

## NOTES

1. P. Kecskemeti, *The Unexpected Revolution: Social Forces in the Hungarian Uprising (1961)*, p. 115.
2. J.J. Marie and B. Nagy, eds. *Pologne-Hongrie 1956 (1966)*, p. 222.
3. E. Kiraly, *Die Arbeitereselbstverwaltung in Ungarn (1961)*, p. 35.
4. B. Nagy, *La Formation du Conseil Central Ouvrier de Budapest en 1956 (1961)*, p. 9.
5. Marie and Nagy, op. cit., pp. 223-224.
6. Ibid., p. 224.
7. Ibid., pp. 225-226.
8. Information about the foundation of the Central Workers' Council and its leading members can be found in B. Nagy, op. cit., pp. 41-45 and 54-58, and in Ferenc Toke, 'Ce que furent les Conseils Ouvriers Hongrois' in Marie and Nagy, op. cit., p. 252, and M. Sebestyen, 'Mes Expériences dans le Conseil Central Ouvrier du Grand Budapest', also in Marie and Nagy, p. 300.
9. For Kádár's speech, see M.J. Lasky ed, *The Hungarian Revolution: A white Book (1957)*, pp. 262-263.
10. Toke, op. cit., p. 258.
11. J. Molnar, *A Nagybudapesti Kozponti Munkastanacs (The Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest) (1969)*, pp. 63-64 and Sebestyen, op. cit., p. 301.
12. Quoted in Toke, op. cit., p. 260.
13. Sebestyen, op. cit., p. 303.
14. Relations between the workers' councils and the trade unions are discussed in Kiraly, op. cit., pp. 41-52.
15. Considerable information relating to the conflicts between the workers' councils and the Party organisations, trade unions and factory directors is provided in Molnar, op. cit., pp. 73-82.
16. Marie and Nagy, op. cit., pp. 317-318.
17. Details of the Central Council's memorandum, and of its plans for a National Workers' Council and a Workers' Parliament can be found in Molnar, op. cit., pp. 118-119 and 129-130.
18. The meeting is described in some detail in Toke, op. cit., pp. 267-268.
19. Marie and Nagy, op. cit., p. 326.