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ORGANISING FOR WORKERS' POWER

potere operaio

italy

Rising Free reprint 3

8p.

Though we by no means wholly agree with this document, we're reprinting it as a worthwhile contribution to an important debate on the new modes and conceptions of organisation called for by the radically new confrontation of forces in late capitalist Europe. This debate began in Italy, as in most of Europe, long before British libertarians started to take it seriously. Perhaps this document may help us to make up for lost time; though the "correct" solution will emerge from the revolutionary practice of millions of people, if it emerges at all.

Our main disagreement with the Potere Operaio comrade is precisely his failure to make a clean break with Bolshevik models and expressions; the disguising of an anti-Leninist theory as a kind of updating, the compressing of new experiences and solutions within the straitjacket of "party-vanguard-mass". However genuine the anti-authoritarianism of Potere Operaio may be, there can be no compromises in the rejection of any power separate from the working class.

Despite this and other criticisms, we think the pamphlet's worth reproducing - if only to balance the considerable presence of Lotta Continua (Fight On!) in this country with a Potere Operaio contribution. This pamphlet was written by Sofri before he left Potere Operaio to join Lotta Continua. The simple history of the work demonstrates the growing, vital internationalism of revolutionary forces; this is a page-for-page reproduction of a Canadian translation of a French version of the Italian original. The revolution is worldwide.

by members of the Rising Free Collective

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organising for workers' power

Why has the problem of the party - understood not simply as the need for organisation, but as the need for a general political leadership - not to this point been the subject of systematic discussion? In the past, the problem of the party was posed only in terms of the numerical growth of subjectively "revolutionary" groups. We have clearly rejected this approach; instead, we have opted for direct and ongoing involvement with the reality of the class struggle. This was a correct and important option on our part, which has already provided some elements for fruitful discussion.

We reject two types of conception of the party: the first, according to which the consciousness of the necessity of the party, of an organised political leadership, is sufficient to create the conditions for the development of the party; the second, which sees revolutionary political leadership, the party as the linear continuation of a past revolutionary tradition (be it Marxism, Marxism-Leninism, Marxism-Leninism-Maoism) which has been at different times in the past corrupted and regenerated - in this conception, revolutionary strategy is always seen as the "return" to the "correct" revolutionary tradition.

For us, the correctness of revolutionary leadership, strategy and revolutionary organisation derives neither from past revolutionary experience nor from the consciousness that the party is necessary. Their correctness derives, in the final analysis, from their relationship to the masses, and their capacity to be the conscious and general expression of the revolutionary needs of the oppressed masses....

Does this mean that revolutionary leadership develops "spontaneously" from the masses, and that it coincides with the

development of the struggle of the masses itself? Does it mean we can simply wipe out the distinction between vanguard and masses, and conclude they should be one and the same thing? The answer is no. But it is precisely here, in the definition of the concept we have of "vanguard", that lies the heart of the problem.

For Lenin, revolutionary consciousness is produced by the encounter between the "economic" struggle of the working class (which, in Lenin's view, was inherently trade unionist, thus always within the capitalist system) and Marxist intellectuals who have broken with their bourgeois class origins and allied themselves with the interests of the working class. Consciousness thus "comes to" the working class "from the outside". And it is the party, the organisation of revolutionaries equipped with the tools of Marxist analysis, which embodies the revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat.

In passing, we shouldn't forget the point correctly made by the anti-Leninist tradition: the "bureaucratic degeneration" which is inherent in the Leninist conception of the relationship between the party and the masses. At the same time, we should never forget that the history of the Bolshevik party is the history of decades of heroic, tenacious, systematic struggle to develop links with the working class and the oppressed masses of Tsarist Russia. The Bolshevik's confidence in the masses, and their capacity to link themselves to the masses in circumstances which made the struggle infinitely cruel, can never be denied by anyone who really wants to understand the victory of the October Revolution.

But the Leninist definition cannot provide us today with a solution to the problems we have to confront in advanced capitalist society. The Leninist definition of "spontaneous" workers' struggles as inherently trade unionist and "economist" leads to the posing of the question of revolutionaries' relationship to the working class in terms of ideological "conquest" and of "the injecting from the outside" of "political" consciousness. The spontaneous struggle of workers cannot be

seen as simply specific, local, trade unionist struggles of workers in this plant against their bosses in this plant: on the contrary, spontaneous rank and file struggles have attained a high level of political contestation of capitalist rationality. This is very clear in the great workers' struggles in recent years in the advanced capitalist countries (France, May '68; Italy since 1968....). It is impossible to reduce these struggles to simply "economist" demands - as the unions have discovered - and it's no coincidence that the unions are now trying to put the brakes on these struggles and co-opt them into the trade union framework. All this should justify neither a metaphysic of workers' self-organisation, nor the reduction of class consciousness to the consciousness of relations of production in the plant. But we have to recognise that consciousness is not "outside" the masses.

At the same time, we can no longer accept the validity, in advanced capitalist society, of Lenin's definition of intellectuals ("the cultured representatives of the dominant classes"): this definition cannot accurately fit the profound transformation in the class composition of advanced capitalist societies, as the student movement demonstrated so clearly (unless we want to continue to define the majority of students as "bourgeois intellectuals" who make the revolution by rejecting their own class). It is true that "without revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary movement" (Lenin), but it is true in a new sense: revolutionary theory doesn't "penetrate" mass movements from the outside, but develops within mass struggles, as the systematic knowledge of the needs of the masses and as their generalisation, in an incessant dialectical process.

Anyone who wants to examine seriously the historical experience of the Leninist model has to come to grips with how the Leninist concept of the vanguard, while it was carried by Lenin and the Bolsheviks with an extraordinary revolutionary tension, later justified the most thoroughgoing arbitrariness in the relationship between the party and the masses. The problem is certainly not located in the absence of an "institutional",

"statutory" control of the masses over the party, but in the type of mass-party relationship inherent in the Leninist conception itself.

The Leninist conception poses the problem of the mass-party relationship in the following terms: workers' struggles (inherently "economic"); "economic" organisation of workers (trade unions); party (external "revolutionary" consciousness) works within the trade unions (the transmission belt for injecting revolutionary consciousness) and thereby controls (or "represents") the working class. This conception is totally foreign to us.

The only correct perspective for handling the mass-vanguard relationship starts with the politicization and organisation of the masses in order to arrive at the development and unification of a mass vanguard. It's not just a question of a subjective necessity for democracy at the base, but of an objective necessity: revolution in the advanced capitalist countries is not made possible or necessary by the economic collapse of capitalism, but by the ripening of political confrontation between capital and the proletariat. This implies changing from the perspective of insurrection to the perspective of protracted (eventually armed) struggle, even in the advanced capitalist countries.....

May '68 in France is a good illustration. Rarely have such idiotic interpretations been heard. They fall into two categories: the first, which correctly emphasises the spontaneous and political character of the workers' explosion, draws lessons which justify spontaneist positions (rejection of organisational work and rejection of the need for political leadership); the second, which correctly notes the incapacity of the struggle to move towards the seizure of power, draws the lesson that the absence of a revolutionary party is the key factor. The first interpretation has been proven incorrect by events themselves. The second, interesting because it's more typical, suggests that to "seize power", it would have been

enough to simply lead one of the mass workers' demonstrations to the president's palace. In this view, the party is seen as an external leadership, operating according to a logic autonomous of the mass struggle, which, in a context of acute social crisis places itself at "the head" of a spontaneous movement and points the way to the seizure of power. Conclusion: the mass movement exists, but it has no head; let's build the party and attach it to the "body" of the masses.

Our position has been different. The problem in France was not the seizure of power, but power. The problem of bourgeois power was raised by very significant, spontaneous mass vanguards (the student movement, particular sections of the working class - workers in the mass production industries and certain more technically qualified strata such as technicians), and not by and external leadership. At the same time, the spontaneous, proletarian struggle of May '68 discovered in its lack of unification and in its own lack of organisation the insurmountable limitations of its political and practical force. In this phase of the struggle, then, the tasks of revolutionaries are the organisation and linking up of these mass vanguards, the extension and development of autonomous mass organisations at the base (e.g., in the plants and other work places, in the schools, etc.), and the bringing together, from the different fronts of struggle, of a revolutionary political leadership to guide and unify the struggle. This is the only way that general political leadership can lead to a situation of dual power and the destruction of the bourgeois state. The problem for revolutionaries is not to "place yourself" at the head of the masses, but to be the head of the masses.

I want to submit a new concept for discussion which has a quite concrete importance for our experience as militants in "Workers' Power" (in the period preceding the outbreak of mass spontaneous workers' struggles in Italy): the concept of external vanguard. "Workers' Power" is the product of the subjective initiative of a certain number of individuals who, having agreed upon a certain political orientation, decided, on

this basis, to do an ongoing liaison, formation and organisational work with workers and others.

Then isn't "Workers' Power" and "external" vanguard? In fact, in many instances, yes; but in principle, the answer is no, precisely because we do not see ourselves as the embryo - however tiny - of the party, but rather as a group of militants whose objective is to accelerate the conditions necessary for the development of the mass revolutionary organisation - a group of militants at the service of the development of forms of consciousness, struggle and autonomous organisation.

The history of our political work - a history with plenty of detours, because of our own subjective shortcomings as well as of what only our experience could have taught us - is rich in lessons, but this isn't the time to go over it. However, there is one central point which would be useful to recall. At a certain point in the development of our work, reflection on forms of base organisations (base committees) became collective and assumed a decisive importance in our work. But the problem of "workers' council" posed itself to us in a new way, as the extension of the work carried on by militants in "Workers' Power" and as the result of our analysis of a certain number of fundamental experiences: the student movement, the May Movement in France, workers' struggles in Italy and, in a broader framework, the cultural Revolution in China and its lessons for revolutionaries in advanced capitalist countries. These fundamental experiences clarified two approaches we had oscillated between for a long time: on the one hand, identification with the role of "external" vanguard, with all that implies; on the other hand, the possibility of acting, in and through the development of the mass struggle, as the first form of linkage between the mass vanguards.

What does this distinction mean? To what extent does this terminology correspond to a political reality and not simply to a play on words?

We have established a relationship with workers (I mean the mass of workers in particular struggles, and not individual "contacts") based on two closely related principles:-

-rejection of the delegation of powers to the bureaucratic workers' organisations (trade unions & CP), and proposing the alternative of autonomous base organisations directly controlled by the workers;

-a political line which begins with the daily problems of the working class (both inside and outside the workplace), and gradually situates these problems in the more general context of the anti-imperialist struggle, etc.

We could have measured the "success" of our work either by the development of the creative autonomy of the masses in struggle or by workers transferring to us the delegation of powers they now give to the unions and the CP. In the second case, we would have enjoyed the confidence of the masses, but in the worst possible way, because we would have reproduced, with a different political content, the same authoritarian relationship with the masses. In fact, we would have become "the party", but the same kind of party we want to fight against. This was the inherent danger in what many workers said to us in a variety of ways: "Start another union"; "Why don't you call a strike"; "Why don't you start an organisation".

It may be true that workers have the "spirit of organisation" but it would be wise to recall what Rosa Luxemburg said to Lenin: "Lenin glorifies the educational influence of the factory on the proletariat, which makes it immediately ripe for 'organisation and discipline'. The 'discipline' which Lenin had in mind is implanted in the proletariat not only by the factory but also by the barracks and by modern bureaucratism - in short, by the whole mechanism of the centralised bourgeois state." We should never forget that during decades of reactionary practice by the unions and the CP, organisation was presented to the proletariat only in terms of the vote, of membership cards and blind loyalty to the party apparatus. In these circumstances, it's hardly surprising that the tendency towards external leader-

ship keeps re-appearing among the proletariat itself. The answer to these problems is not the rejection of all organisation, but the proposal of a new type of organisation. When we say: "It's not for us to call a strike", or "We have no intention of starting a new union", we don't limit ourselves to a simple refusal of principle, we do much more: we refuse to perpetuate a relationship of passivity, we refuse to allow workers to depend on us to decide something for them. That's also our answer when it's suggested: "Start a new party".

If we were to define ourselves in the long term as an "external" vanguard, then the problems of the formation of the party becomes simply a question of quantity: when the local "influence" of a group is sufficiently developed, and when a sufficient number of politically homogenous local groups (also "external" vanguards) cover the whole country, then we will have the party. It is important to be clear on why we have rejected this approach.

The development of links with a whole series of proletarian groups and the development of the student movement create the conditions for going beyond the provisional role of "external" vanguard, which, although inevitable at a particular stage in the struggle, should not be considered a permanent necessity. This is why the experience of the student movement in 1967-68 has been decisive in clarifying these questions: it was the first mass struggle with a revolutionary perspective which was not controlled by the trade unions and left organisations. What do we mean when we talk about a "mass struggle"? We are obviously referring neither to a "mass party" such as the Italian Communist Party nor to "mass organisations" of the trade union type. When we use the word "mass", it is not the numerical size which counts (although it is an important aspect) but rather the qualitative aspect of the struggle: the fact that a struggle develops among a whole class stratum (in this case, students) - defined by its place in the social relationships of capitalist production - on the basis of the conditions specific to that class stratum.

The student movement provided the example of a contestation which, beginning with the specific conditions of a proletarianised class stratum, came to put into question the whole structure of bourgeois power, thus situating its struggle on the terrain of revolutionary struggle. It's true there is a vanguard in the student movement, but its logic is specific: it is a non-institutionalised vanguard which is internal to the mass struggle. In this perspective, such a mass internal vanguard has two problems to confront: (1) avoid becoming detached from the mass struggle, and rather seek to stimulate its development; (2) unite with other revolutionary class strata, particularly workers, to avoid eventual impotency and defeat.

These tasks cannot be accomplished either "spontaneously" or by joining some "external" vanguard. These tasks of political leadership and organisation belong to the vanguards of the mass struggle, which are mass, internal vanguards. These vanguards intervene in struggles outside their own class stratum not as an "external" leadership, but as the internal leadership of its own front of struggle..... Although this perspective doesn't provide any ready-made solutions to the specific problems of revolutionary leadership and organisation, it does allow us to recognise for the first time in the development of the student movement the verification in practice of the correctness of the revolutionary line. That's why the political leadership of the student is not "the party", understood as an external revolutionary line, but in promoting the struggle of the masses and its autonomous self-organisation.

Now we are seeing the massive development of workers' and peasants' struggles in Italy, but they are prisoners of the division and repressive control of the counter-revolutionary parties and trade unions as much as of their own lack of organisation. In these circumstances, the task of revolutionaries is not to provide an administrative reference point, a new party, but rather to put themselves at the service of the autonomous organisation of the masses. The formation of a general revolutionary leadership and organisation must necess-

arily go through this phase.... After all the theories about the integration of workers in advanced capitalist society, France has given us an idea of what the masses are capable of doing, once liberated even briefly from the repressive yoke of their "representatives". At the same time, May '68 and its aftermath are clear evidence that the imprint of decades of deformations in the workers' movement can't be eliminated overnight.

What does all this mean in terms of organisation? First, the rejection of organisational forms which claim from the beginning to be a general political leadership (whether they call themselves party or not), and whose centralisation is the result not of the political maturation of the mass struggle, but rather the option of a cadre apparatus. Although the term "central committee" can mean different things in different contexts, it can mean only a totally unacceptable conception of top-down political leadership in the precise context of the struggle in Italy today.

What are our tasks then? Briefly, they are to create the opportunities and the means for links and communication among workers; to discover ways to have workers themselves participate in analyzing their own struggles and drawing lessons from them; to support as much unity in struggle as possible; to maximize the aspect of workers' autonomy in the choice of organisational forms. If we agree that our goal is the growth of mass struggles and their political polarization, we also have to recognize that this can be accomplished only by encouraging, rather than holding back, the autonomy and variety of struggle experiences, while at the same time promoting common discussion and decision-making among the masses about the significance and perspectives of their struggles.

Centralisation cannot be a cover clamped on struggles from the outside, but must rather be the progressive result of their theoretical and practical co-ordination, so we can avoid the sort of formalism which makes direct relationships impossible

(whether it be the exchange of information or political unity) with different groups, sectors of the movement and isolated comrades. What is most essential is that the development of an overall revolutionary leadership must take place within the mass struggle, and not in a party external or parallel to the mass struggle.

I want to turn now to two important questions which are usually raised in relation to the problem of revolutionary organisation. The first is the problem of repression. It can be asked that if we don't have a centralised organisation, how can we deal with the repression that is bound to come? At one level, the answer is that the more centralised an organisation is, the more it is exposed to repression. A decentralised organisation, in the sense of more autonomous groups exercising initiative and responsibility, is the best guarantee against any eventuality. However, at another level, the problem of centralisation takes on a different sort of importance when it comes to the question of how we can deal with the class enemy in situations of illegal forms of struggle and armed struggle. Here the argument in favour of centralist positions comes into play: "The mass line is correct, but there is also the problem of seizing power, and the problem of the direct struggle with the bourgeois state apparatus and its destruction." It is important to emphasize this argument over against certain anti-authoritarian positions, which, despite their value, often tend to overlook the specific problem of the struggle against the bourgeois state and the problem of the repressive apparatus of the national and international bourgeoisie. However, in dealing with this aspect of the problem, one general principle must be kept in mind at all times: the indispensable condition for the development of an effective and correct centralisation of organisation is the whole process of mass struggle and links between mass internal vanguards outlined above.

This brings us to the second question. We often hear in our discussions the position that the criterion of organisation is its functionality. This position is the most dangerous of all.

Functionality means nothing or everything until it is made clear in relation to what it is functional. For us, organisation must be functional in relation to the political maturation of militants, to the growth of consciousness and autonomous organisation in mass struggles, and to the idea of workers' power we are struggling for. For example, there are at least two conceptions we could have of base committees: either as a form of struggle through which the masses develop the capacity to develop and control their own struggle, or as a "more effective" means of mass mobilisation for an external political leadership. The concept of mass vanguard is the only perspective which confronts in practice, not just in party rules, both the problem of the substitution of the party for the masses and the problem of spontaneism as a revolutionary strategy of mass self-organisation. We have to "believe in the masses", believe in socialism. We have to understand that power is not seized "on behalf of the" proletariat, but that the proletariat itself has to seize power. The new socialist man and woman will not be born after the smashing of capitalism creates the conditions for this transformation; they will be born during the struggle against capitalism.....

Our task today is to build within the mass struggle an organised political leadership, not to "win" the masses to a pre-existing revolutionary leadership. The "cadre party", conceived as an organisation of professional militants, ideologically united around a programme and a strict, statutory discipline, is not what we're about.

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WORKERS' POWER

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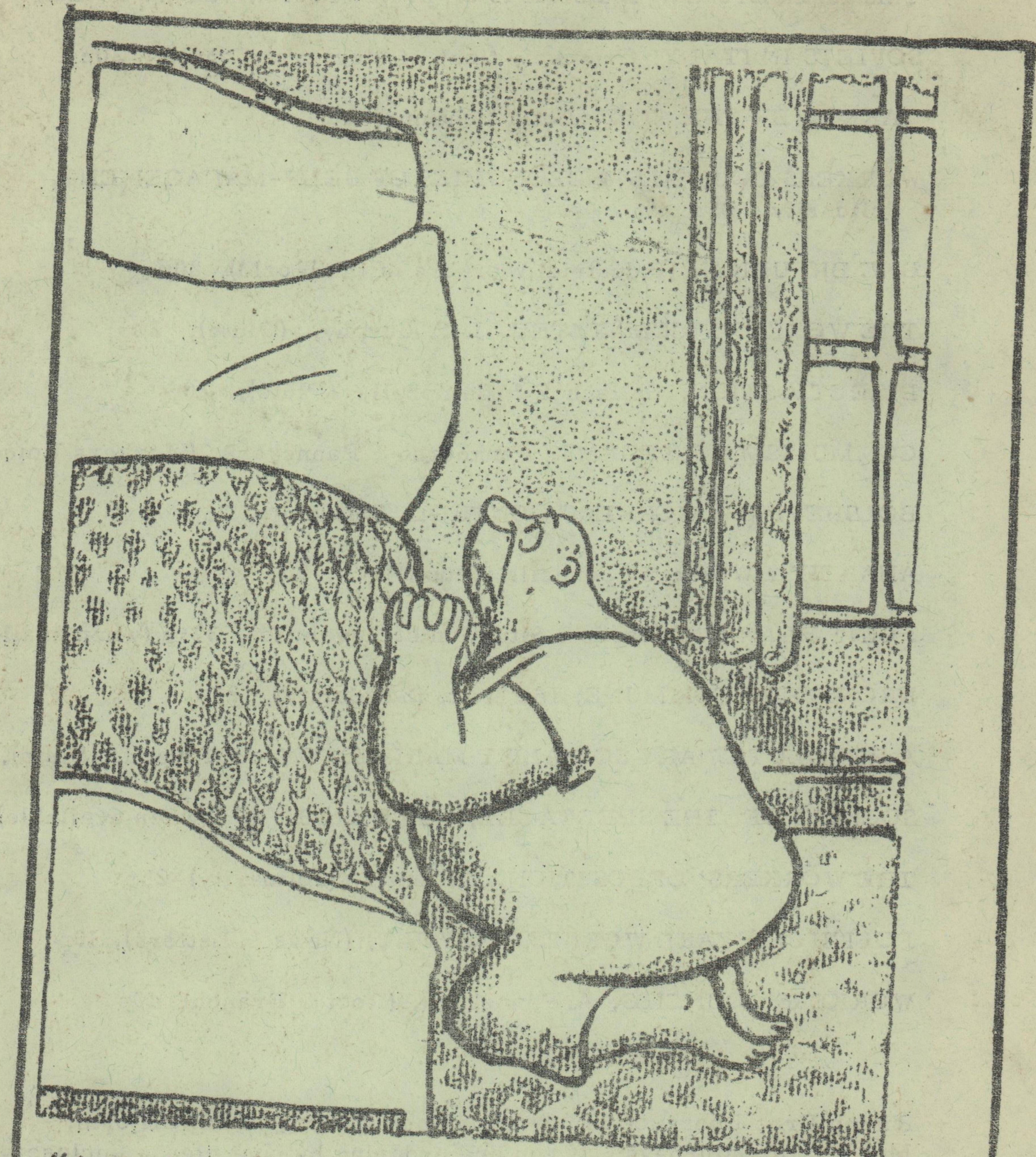
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