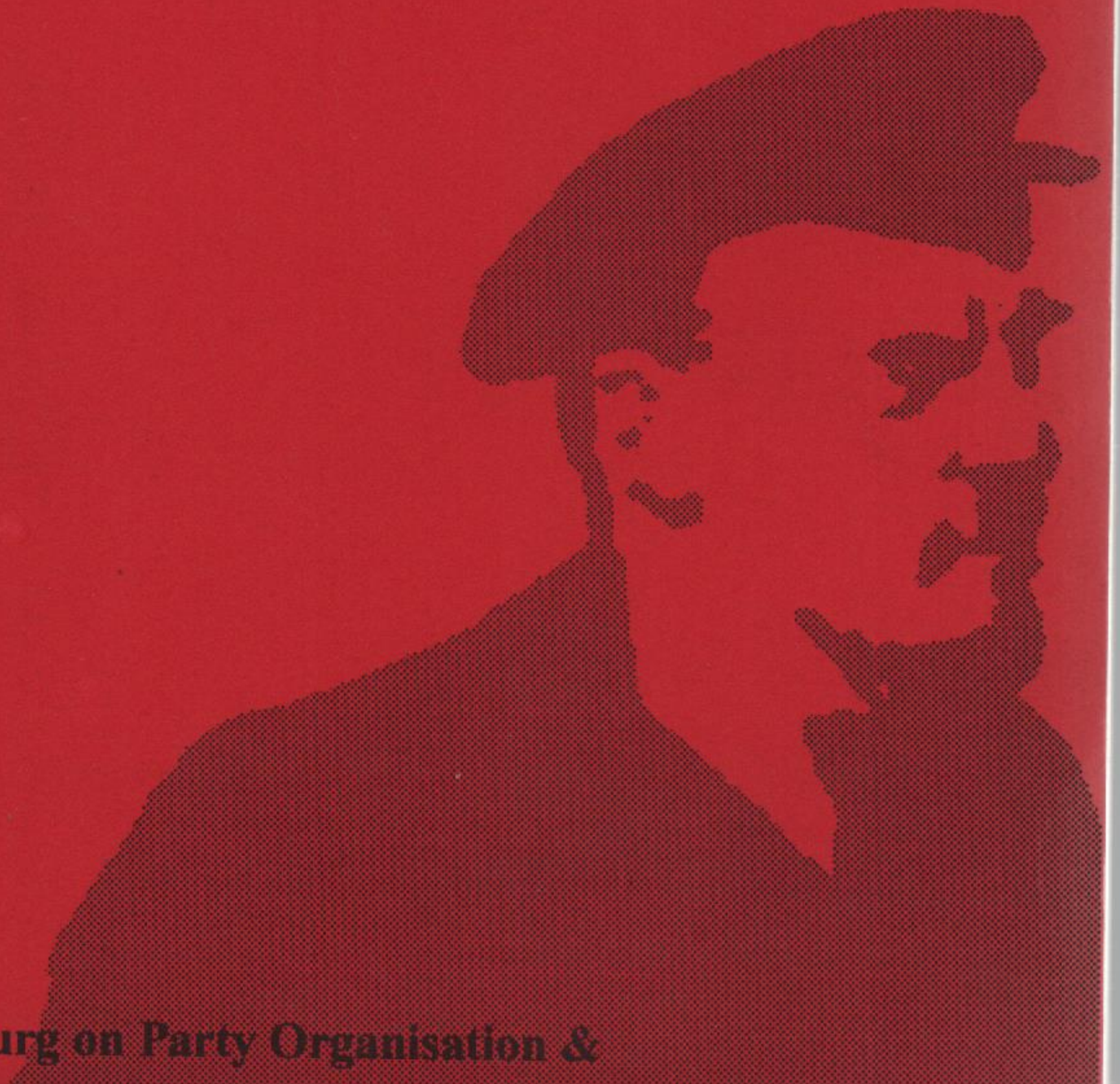


DEMOCRACY AND THE SWP



Rosa Luxemburg on Party Organisation &

IS Group Documents

DEMOCRACY and the SWP

Documents by the British and German IS Groups

(International Socialists)

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INTRODUCTION

This pamphlet has been produced by members and ex-members of the SWP and its German counterpart, the SAG. What we have in common is a commitment to the basic politics of the IS/SWP (International Socialists/Socialist Workers Party) tradition. In the first place this means agreement with the theories developed by the SWP and its forerunners that differentiated it from reformism, anarchism, Stalinism and orthodox Trotskyism; the theories of state capitalism, deflected permanent revolution and permanent arms economy. These theories have helped the SWP to build the largest and most effective revolutionary organisation seen in Britain since the Communist Party of the 20's and 30's.

Although the success of the SWP has yet to be repeated by its fraternal organisations abroad, they too have managed to create at least the basis of revolutionary movements with none of the illusions in reformism and/or Stalinism that have destroyed most of the post-1968 revolutionary left.

We would not be producing this pamphlet if we did not also have fundamental disagreements with the SWP. We believe that despite the importance of its theory, the SWP has failed to break completely with the elitism that characterises most of the left. Although the theories mentioned have at their heart the principle of working class self-emancipation, the SWP's organisational practice falls a long way short of this.

Democracy in the SWP is slowly being closed down. The leadership behave in an increasingly autocratic and arbitrary manner, while the party rank and file grow less and less capable of exercising any real control over them. The structure of the SWP is now almost totally top-down; the Central Committee (CC) appoints the district organisers, the organisers appoint the district committees, and so on down. The National Committee, which included many comrades capable of acting independently of the CC, has been abolished. Party conferences and councils are not exercises in democracy but rallies where the leadership hector the faithful into higher levels of activity. Few can remember the last time a vote at conference was anything less than unanimous.

These leadership methods are preventing the SWP from developing a cadre who can think and act for themselves. The test of its cadre today is not the extent to which they can fight the leadership for an independent perspective, but the lengths they are prepared to go to intimidate anyone who criticises the perspective handed down to them. With each change in the party line, the cadre who carried the last perspective are pilloried unless they throw themselves behind the new line. Anyone who criticises is suspect, persistent critics are marginalised or expelled. The result is that - despite ritual proclamations of loyalty to the leadership and of belief in the

'massive opportunities for building the party' - the party cadre are increasingly meek and compliant in public, and just as cynical and resentful in private.

We believe this situation has its origins in the way the IS (forerunners of the SWP) made its 'leap into Leninism' in the late 1960's & early 1970's. From sympathy with Luxemburg's critique of Lenin, the group suddenly became super-Leninists - without accounting properly for the change. It should be clear from the documents that the comrades producing this pamphlet agree with democratic centralism and see themselves, at least in this sense, as Leninists, but we do not think this means rejecting Luxemburg's fundamental attitude to democracy.

The top-down leadership of the SWP is not democratic centralist but bureaucratic centralist, and while this strict centralism might be justified in the most extreme circumstances, those circumstances hardly apply now. We believe there is no reason today why a revolutionary organisation should not be fully democratic; its leadership at every level should be elected and properly accountable, and it should allow members full rights to organise to oppose the line of the leadership without being branded as renegades.

Similar criticisms of the German SAG led a group of its comrades to form an IS group (GIS) earlier this year. In Britain a small group of ex-comrades and comrades have also decided to form an IS group (ISG).

The documents in this pamphlet were produced at different times and for different reasons by supporters of the GIS and ISG. They include the statement of the GIS agreed at their founding conference and the discussion document prepared by expelled members of the SWP as they argued about what step to take next after leaving (and being expelled from) the party. Also included is a short theoretical piece written as part of the attempt to analyse our attitude to party and class and party building, as well as extracts from an article by Rosa Luxemburg on party organisation. Taken together, these articles do not claim to offer the definitive analysis of the SAG/SWP and a recipe for the solution of all our problems - but we think they are a small step.

Our aim in producing the pamphlet is to address those influenced by the SWP - members, nonmembers and ex-members - to convince them that it is possible to criticise the party legitimately from within the IS tradition. Hopefully it will also convince some to contact us and help give this criticism an organised voice.

IS Group
September 1994



GIS DOCUMENT

WHY WE CANNOT STAY ORGANISED IN THE SAG (GERMAN IS-ORGANISATION) AND WILL FOUND THE GIS (GROUP FOR INTERNATIONAL SOCIALISM)

For 25 years the SAG and especially its leadership (PK) has been unable to produce independent theoretical work, to analyse the political situation and to derive successful tactics from this. Between the end of the 70's and 1987 the SAG has consequently ignored the decline in the workers movement. Accordingly the SAG's movementist 'passing through' organisation has stagnated for decades, instead of slowly but gradually building a nucleus of cadres as a propaganda group. As late as 1987 a halfhearted propaganda orientation was implemented under pressure from the SWP, leading to moderate growth of the group. No later than 1992 the SAG took up again its actionist movement interventionism, following a right-wing opportunist line. This new line was theoretically justified by an unrealistic sectarian analysis of social polarisation, which allegedly would lead to a continuous 'class war' intensifying from now on 'without any pause' in struggle.

At the same time the leadership made it impossible to argue another political line within the organisation. Today the political atmosphere in the SAG is characterised by censorship, clique structures of the leadership, the hysterical search for scapegoats and systematic personal attacks below the belt.

International socialists in Germany need an alternative to this bureaucratically degenerated, stagnating organisation.

POLITICAL SITUATION

Since 1989 significant political changes have led to an increasingly unstable situation, which in comparison to the 80's offers more and better, rapidly changing intervention opportunities for socialists, demanding a great deal of flexibility:

By overthrowing the state-capitalist bureaucracies in the former 'eastern bloc' countries the working class didn't achieve a social revolution with workers control over production, but basic political rights like freedom of assembly and of organisa-

tion. These provide better conditions for the working class in its fight against the catastrophic deterioration of living standards following the complete economic collapse in the ex-Stalinist states, now integrated into the world market.

In the west increasing international competition in the present recession has eliminated any resources for reformist redistributionist politics. In this situation capital is even forced to attack for decades successfully defended gains of the workers movement. At the cost of the working class capitalists could rationalise, thus helping to start the new accumulation cycle early 1994 in the US and UK. But resistance by the international workers movement is growing, as demonstrated by general strike movements in recent years in Spain, Greece, Italy, Belgium or by the militant Air France strike and powerful minimum wage cut protests in France. Also in Germany tens of thousands of workers demonstrated, and in some cases like Bischofferode occupied their factories. So far workers protest is still focusing on immediate economic issues and not yet generalised to political demands. If at all, polarisation in a politically organisational sense can mainly be observed on the right and only marginally on the left. Resistance for example of the Bischofferode miners remained isolated and didn't spread.

The ideological climate in German society is contradictory: On the one side the deep crisis of traditional bourgeois parties as well as social democracy, the doubts about the necessity of arms spending, the waning myth of the free market; on the other side racism and nationalism are becoming more and more respectable, the ideas of socialism, class struggle or simply of collective resistance are still very discredited.

We have to take into account the possibility that the CDU/CSU (Tories), SPD (German labour party) and trade union bureaucrats succeed in making the working class accept further cuts for the sake of Germany's challenged competitiveness and postpone its demands until the promised economic upturn and a Scharping SPD government. Illegal strikes and a left-wing split from the JUSOS (SPD youth) are possible but unlikely.

WORKING CLASS ORIENTATION

Also in the present day history is still determined by class struggle. The working class is the only class which has got the objective interest plus the power to overthrow the capitalist profit system, necessary for the liberation of all oppressed groups.

Considering the present level of working class struggle and consciousness as well as the lack of perspective for immediate short-term improvement of living conditions, which a small revolutionary organisation can offer to the working class, our organisation is hardly attractive for the vast majority today. But the upturn of struggles and the ideological crisis of the free market increasingly raises a few working class militants' interest in our ideas. Even though most of them won't join yet because of our small size, it is extremely important for our comrades to make contact

with these militants in the workplace, to skill themselves in concrete propaganda, e.g. concerning wage struggles, and to learn how to act within the trade unions.

Only by keeping in touch this way we will at all notice any major shift in the mood of the class and be able to intervene in a prepared way, before we can read it in the press or a struggle is already over.

The pamphlet, *The Smallest Mass Party in the World*, concludes that "... unless a revolutionary group remains in intimate contact with its audience, the dangers of falling into a complete fantasy world are very great indeed." The SAG is getting lost in a self-made fantasy world, because it makes a virtue out of its refusal to let comrades gain experience in the workers movement.

BUILDING THE ORGANISATION, RELATIONSHIP TO MOVEMENTS AND CADRE FORMATION

Today the most urgent task for workers is still to build a nucleus of cadres, out of which in a future upsurge of class struggle a revolutionary workers party can grow. Cadres as we want them to develop in our new organisation are comrades able to argue our politics, to work out or to evaluate another analysis of a political situation, to sell papers and to intervene in public.

Social movements fighting symptoms of the capitalist profit system cannot win within capitalism in the long run and inevitably exist only transiently. Very often the following movement ideologically as well as organisationally starts again from scratch. Even in times of political apathy the few halfhearted movements which exist are able to absorb all the resources of a small revolutionary organisation.

Where, how long and how intensively we intervene in a movement must not depend on any 'specific value' of the movement, but merely on the tactical question, where we with our small forces can operate most effectively for the long term interest of the international working class, the overthrowing of capitalism. In the present situation taking into account our size the best way of serving this long term interest of the international working class is to build such a nucleus of cadres.

Alleged pre-revolutionary conditions as described by the PK led to a disastrous party building line at the 1993 conference; educationals in general mean sectarian internalisation, internal controversy now comes down to sabotaging our fabulous opportunities, membership conditions for the activists expected to join now not simply as single individuals but as whole 'milieus' have to be kept very low... etc.

The precondition for joining our new organisation, the GIS, will be a basic understanding of revolutionary socialist politics.

The SAG is presently winning people out of social movements solely on the basis of activism under false pretences, under the motto 'Fight the NAZIS, join the SAG'. Too many new (and experienced) comrades leave the SAG, burnt out by its activism or for lack of political education, unable to understand one of the numerous sharp turns performed by the PK.

In the GIS we want to win new comrades completely on the basis of revolutionary socialist politics during or at the latest shortly after the collapse of the movement from which they were won. In our new organisation we will educate new comrades systematically. We can learn from the positive example of the educationals in Frankfurt and Hannau demanded by members against the resistance of the leadership. The SAG "Marxismus" weekends were in reality a mere propaganda happening and lacked any educational character for members.

The extreme fluctuation due to 'burn out' and lack of theory as demonstrated for example by the disappearance of the complete Cologne branch within two years, explains the SAG's stagnation. Sharp turns, which of course are necessary at times, can only be understood and put into practice by educated cadres. Precisely because the SAG hardly educates any cadres and the few existing ones are not involved in the discussion of new lines, which are decided by the PK on its own, wrong decisions are continuously being made: The PK realised too late the importance of the 1992 public sector strike and the Bischofferode solidarity campaign respectively. The inflexible permanent orientation to the antifascist movement 1991/1992 was corrected much too late.

DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM

New political lines in the SAG are not implemented by a widespread discussion of an analysis, but preached in a 'black and white', oversimplified manner, and expected to be accepted without serious discussion. Comrades who reject this caricature of democratic centralism, especially the cadres who criticise ludicrous PK decisions in a competent way, are kicked out of the organisation by the PK as scapegoats for the organisations' stagnation, thus increasing the groups' lack of cadres even more.

A socialist organisation claiming to be Marxist cannot exist without a realistic analysis of mistakes and successes or without the broad democratic debate about the right line necessary for decisions to be put into practice by the membership. Such debate is turned into tactical pseudo-discussion by the PK, serving merely as a justification of the leadership. We do not criticise this centralist, but no longer democratic, practice of the allegedly democratic centralist SAG in a moral way, but understand it politically.

In contrast to the SWP at the start of her major growth in the student movement, the SAG today has a maximum of 300 members. In this situation the organisation is expected to 'digest' the predicted massive influx of (inconsistently revolutionary socialist) movement activists. The PK's undemocratic and damaging solution is the establishment of a kind of 'inner party', which monopolises information and decides even postponable, non-urgent issues beforehand without involving the membership in discussions or even informing it about decisions. This way they hope to keep the unevenly growing organisation on a revolutionary socialist line. This concept of a 'democratic centralism for the core of the party' was argued for by the PK in private

discussions but never openly. What it comes down to is the introduction of an undeclared candidate status for second-class members, which we strongly reject.

In contrast to the SAG's practice, democratic centralism for us means:

- Branch- or party-leadership decisions can be reversed by a majority of a branch meeting or a party conference respectively.
- The opportunity for continuous information and discussion, by means of a bulletin accessible to all members, is vital. Censorship should only apply to contributions putting comrades or the organisation in danger and should be made visible by blacking out the censored sections.
- A politically strong leadership is nearly always able to convince instead of having to act in a formal and administrative manner.
- We do not make our leadership plan 100% of the comrades' political energy. Given regular participation in the groups' activities and debates, experimental initiatives by rank and file members are necessary and to be encouraged. The less we are rooted in the class, the more effort is necessary to get a realistic view of the situation in the class in a certain locality, in some cases it must be possible to visit a union or strike meeting and just listen to it. Because we presently do not lead strikes we are in no position to decide whether our proposals are right or wrong, simply by looking at the outcome of the strike.
- The smaller an organisation is, the more limited our leaderships' possibilities are, and the more coincidental our experiences and subjective conditions in the branch are, the more difficult it is to issue tactical instructions from the centre (who should intervene, and how, in which committee or demo) that will be applicable locally.
- However, the organisation and its leadership has to be informed of all local decisions and initiatives, so that it can generalise such activities for the whole group or if necessary forbid them. Taking up initiatives from the rank and file, knowing and taking into account special abilities and preferences of comrades, etc., is a matter of the political (leadership) culture of an organisation. It is not a matter of a 'right' for a local or individual politics apart from, in addition to, instead of, or in conflict with the politics of the whole group. The notion of being able to declare in public part of some well known comrades' activities as private is unrealistic.

MINORITY POLITICS AND ASSIMILATION

The SAG missed the unique opportunity to take a big step forward in fusing with Sosjalist Isci (SI), the German IS organisation for Turkish comrades, to build a single revolutionary socialist organisation for the whole of Germany's multinational working class. The PK did not see the SI cadres as a valuable gain, as experienced comrades

who had independently arrived at a consistent point of view, but merely as a threat to their position.

We reject the discrimination of one language as practised by the SAG as chauvinist and insist on equal rights for the native tongues spoken by comrades.

In contrast to the SAG we do not demand assimilation from the immigrants in Germany. Assimilation to the international capitalist world, or to the national culture of the immigration country respectively happens involuntarily as a result of capitalist economic development. For socialists it neither makes sense to demand this inevitable assimilation side by side with the oppressors, nor to condemn it generally. As a precondition for working class unity we fight for measures which allow minorities to participate in social and political life with equal rights.

ANTIFASCIST AND OTHER ALLIANCES

The SAG unconditionally aims at official participation of trade unions or SPD in antifascist alliances and consequently, in a right-wing opportunist way, gives up any direct physical confrontation with fascists in favour of merely demonstrating far away from the fascists' meetings.

In spite of preaching it, the SAG is not practising the British ANL's successful strategy of the 70's of building alliances based solely on the need for physical confrontation with fascist organisations without making anti-racism, etc., a precondition for taking part.

The SAG completely dismisses the fact that successful 'united front' politics is only possible with organisations of comparable size, that means for today's SAG realistically not with 'the trade union bureaucracy', but rather with certain local branches like trade union youth groups, etc.

Completely overestimating itself, the SAG in a cramped and artificial manner tries to separate itself from other antifascist or left organisations, the so-called 'left dregs', who have 'not understood' that in the antifascist struggle only a united front orientation towards the workers organised in the SPD can win. Being ignored by the SPD and DGB (German TUC) most of the time, the SAG permanently runs tiny antifascist alliances consisting solely of SAG comrades, and treating them like a satellite organisation.

We stand for an antifascist alliance policy that takes into account the size of the organisations involved. Under certain circumstances this can also mean uniting with other revolutionary parts of the workers movement, thus trying to move bigger reformist workers organisations towards a more revolutionary orientation in the antifascist struggle.

There will be more success in both antifascist struggles and in recruiting new comrades if we do not treat antifascist alliances like satellite organisations.

★ *This declaration was passed by the 1st congress for the foundation of the GIS (Group for International Socialism). Frankfurt, April 1994.*



ISG DOCUMENT

FOR A DEMOCRATIC SWP

The IS tradition (Socialist Review Group, International Socialists, SWP, and the international organisations affiliated with this tradition) has carried out some of the most important theoretical work in the postwar left and has organised tens of thousands of revolutionaries in the course of over thirty years activity. The theories of state capitalism, deflected permanent revolution and permanent arms economy, developed by Cliff, Kidron, Harris and others, laid the basis for these achievements. These theories allowed revolutionaries to relate to imperialism, national liberation struggles and the class struggle at home on the basis of Marx's fundamental idea that the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class. The theory meant that, unlike the rest of the left, the IS tradition developed as a group based on this idea of working class self-emancipation, without falling into the sort of illusions in Stalinism, reformism or national liberation movements that dogged the rest of the left.

However, the IS/SWP has not translated its theoretical commitment to working class self-emancipation into its theory and practice of organisation. Instead, under Cliff's influence, it simply borrows elements of Bolshevik practice in a one-sided and *ad hoc* way to enforce whatever turn the leadership has in mind at the time. Lenin's name is used to justify a bureaucratic practice designed to make sure that the central committee (CC) maintain total control of party organisation and activity. The result is that the SWP today is not a democratic centralist organisation capable of developing a revolutionary cadre. Instead, successive layers of cadre are driven out of the party, or into passivity within the party, every time the leadership makes one of its characteristic 'turns'.

Naturally it is necessary for the organisation to make sharp changes of direction. The problem lies not with the fact that these turns take place, but in the methods used to carry them out (and especially with the leadership's bizarre interpretation of 'stick bending'), and with the internal organisation of the party that has grown up to enforce these methods.

THE VANGUARD AND SELF-EMANCIPATION

There is a dialectical contradiction between a revolutionary party and the working class as a whole. On the one hand there is the need for revolutionaries to intervene and attempt to lead in the class struggle. On the other hand, the situation in which a

party intervenes is always shifting, giving rise to new types of struggle and a different balance of class forces. The activity of the working class is always creating new lessons for revolutionaries, and constantly challenges the preconceptions of even the best Marxists. This means that while a revolutionary organisation is always fighting to achieve some kind of leadership in the movement, at the same time it always has to be ready to let the advanced workers influence, direct, and so 'lead' the party.

The organisation of a revolutionary party should embody this contradiction. In order to intervene it is necessary for the party to act in a unified manner to the extent that it is possible to do so. This requires a centralised party regime, such that once political and tactical decisions have been arrived at, they are carried out to maximum effect. Just as necessary to the party is the kind of democratic structure (and political culture) that would allow the rank and file (who reflect the experiences and aspirations of workers) to actively influence the organisation.

This democratic centralism would result in a situation where the leadership would hold influence in the party only to the extent that they could convince the members of the correctness of their perspectives and, crucially, the members would be cadres, capable of acting independently of the leadership and organising to oppose them when necessary; members would have the power to elect (and recall) the leadership at every level; no section of the party would have a monopoly of information; and every member would have the freedom to communicate with other members to argue their own politics, whether or not these agree with the perspectives of the leadership. Democracy in a revolutionary party should involve not only the freedom to applaud and re-elect the leadership but, in Luxemburg's words, freedom for those who think differently.

The only limits to full internal democracy concern cases in which members refuse to accept the collective decisions of the party, where these decisions concern central organisational and political questions, and actively impede their implementation, or where they threaten the security of the party. The only criterion for membership of the party should be agreement with the fundamentals of our politics, and not agreement with the perspectives of the existing leadership.

In short, within the bounds that define its membership a revolutionary party should embody, at the very least, normal democratic standards such as freedom of information, the right to independent tribunal if accused of a violation of party discipline, freedom to communicate one's opinions, democratic control of representatives, etc.

THE SWP AND DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM

The SWP is not democratic centralist but bureaucratic centralist. The leadership's control of the party is unchecked by the members. New perspectives are initiated exclusively by the central committee (CC), who then implement their perspective against all party opposition, implicit or explicit, legitimate or otherwise.

Once a new perspective is declared, a new cadre is selected from the top down to carry it out. The CC select the organisers, who select the district and branch committees. Any elections that take place are carried out on the basis of 'slates' so that it is virtually impossible for members to vote against the slate proposed by the leadership - comrades have either to vote for the slate as a whole or propose a completely different alternative. Any members who have doubts or disagreements with the new perspective, and who are consequently unenthusiastic about implementing it, are written off as 'burnt out', and, depending on their reaction to this, may be marginalised within the party and even expelled.

These methods have been disastrous for the SWP in a number of ways:

- Each new perspective requires a new cadre (below the level of the CC), so the existing cadre are actively marginalised in the party. In this way, the SWP has failed to build a stable and experienced middle cadre capable of acting independently of the leadership. Successive layers of cadres have been driven into passivity, and even out of the revolutionary movement altogether. The result is the loss of hundreds of potential cadres. Instead of appraising the real, uneven development of individual cadres, the history of the party is written dualistically in terms of a star system (comrades currently favoured by the party) and a demonology (the 'renegades' who are brushed aside with each turn of the party).
- As a result of this systematic dissolution of the cadre, the CC grows ever more remote from the membership and increasingly bureaucratic in its methods. In recent years the national committee has been abolished (it obediently voted for its own dissolution, on the recommendation of the CC), to be replaced by party councils made up of those comrades active at any one time (i.e. those most enthusiastic about current perspectives); district committees are appointed rather than elected; the CC monopolise all information concerning the party, so that it is impossible for members to know much about what happens in the party outside their own branch; the CC give a distorted account of events rather than admit their mistakes (so the scale of the crisis in the party in 1986-1987 was admitted in documents presented to the international meeting, but not to the party rank and file, or at least not in anything like the same terms); history is rewritten to reinforce the prestige of the CC (their underestimation of the community campaign against the poll tax, which was disastrous for the party, especially in Scotland, is never mentioned). When there are political differences, comrades may be removed from their positions in the party, and even expelled, but this is carried out behind closed doors, and the differences are never taken to the party itself.
- The outcome is a party whose conferences have no democratic function, but serve only to orientate party activists to carry out perspectives drawn up by the CC long before the delegates even set out from their branches. At every level of the party, strategy and tactics are presented from the top down, as

predigested instructions for action. At every level, the comrades 'below' are seen only as a passive mass to be shifted into action, rather than as a source of new initiatives. The members, districts and branches of the party are treated as mere executive arms of the CC, their role is only to carry out instructions handed down from on high.

The only exception to this rule is when a branch thinks up a new tactic to carry out the CC's perspective. In this case, the CC may adopt the tactic as their own and apply it across the party. In no way do rank and file members play an active role in determining the strategy and theory of the party - except in the negative sense that if they refuse to implement a perspective the CC will eventually modify the line to overcome this opposition.

- A political culture has been created in which the leadership outside of the CC consists almost solely of comrades who are fanatically loyal to the them, willing to follow every turn of the perspective without criticism, and permanently wound up into a state of hysteria about the colossal 'possibilities for growth' which the CC claims have existed for years now. The individual members of this leadership often last for only a short period before 'burn out', after which they become passive and cynical. Those 'cadres' who do manage to make the transition between perspectives are often the most cynical of all the comrades, prepared to do anything at the bidding of the CC.

- Increasingly, the bureaucratic methods used by the CC to enforce their control over the political direction of the party are extended to other areas of party life. In debates over questions of philosophy, culture and even anthropology an informal party 'line' emerged (i.e. concerning matters in which there can be no question of the party having a 'line'). Often behind these positions lay nothing more than the opinions of this or that CC member, but adherence to the line quickly became a test of party loyalty, and disagreement became a stigma. The effect has been to close down party democracy yet further by placing even questions of abstract theory beyond debate.

- Many militants, especially working class militants with some experience of trade union democracy, etc., are repelled by the undemocratic norms in the party and refuse to join, leave soon after joining, or keep their distance despite accepting our formal politics. If these militants do stay in the party it is often because they tactitly accept the lack of internal democracy as the price paid for being organised as a revolutionary.

- A small minority of comrades, in rejecting the undemocratic practices of the party, have come to reject democratic centralism since they believe the SWP to be democratic centralist. They are then attracted by libertarian and anarchist arguments, and are lost as potential cadres.

- Worst of all, the SWP are training a layer of revolutionaries to believe that the organisation of the SWP offers a shining example of democracy, applicable (at least in its essentials) to a future socialist society. Not surprisingly, many people are instinctively repelled by this idea.

- In a situation in which the CC no longer require the membership to play any role as an independent cadre, there is no incentive to train the members in the political traditions of the IS/SWP. Members are required to operate simply as activists, and so all educationals and cadre schools in the party have been closed down in recent years. The annual *Marxism* event no longer serves any serious educational role beyond the bare minimum, being given over to abstract propaganda and party rallies. In this way, the party refuses to develop the many excellent activists it recruits.

Anyone calling for more educational work is dismissed as 'abstract' and 'theoreticist'. The party's increasing contempt for theory, their assumption that theory (education) and practice (activism) are incompatible, serves to reinforce the domination of the CC across the party - by playing up the importance of the least experienced comrades, who are least able and least inclined to criticise the leadership, and minimising the influence of the existing cadre. This prejudice against theory is paraded in the party as a mark of its proletarian character - workers are assumed to prefer 'getting their hands dirty' to 'abstract book learning'. In fact, this prejudice is rooted in the outlook of a petit bourgeois intelligentsia rather than the working class, who, when they move into struggle, develop an thirst for ideas as well as for 'action'.

Concretely, a democratic organisation would involve:

- Regular election of all party full-timers, branch and district leadership, etc., with the right of recall. While it would be normal for factions to propose slates for elections, the candidates would be the individuals rather than the slate.
- The right of branches to propose motions to the party conference.
- For a regular internal bulletin, open to all members. As well as the usual political contributions from members, this bulletin should contain a full account of party activity in every district, with recruitment figures, etc. to the extent that this is compatible with security. The bulletin should not be censored in any way except, once again, where information would compromise party security.
- The right for members to communicate horizontally in the party, to produce and distribute their own documents.
- For an independent Control Commission to review all disciplinary cases (independent of the leadership bodies that exercise discipline), and the right of any disciplined comrades to appeal directly to party conference.

The bureaucratisation of the IS tradition is not an episode, a subjective failure by a section of the leadership, or a product of adverse circumstances (although it has been accelerated by the low level of struggle in Britain over a decade). The roots of the problem lie with the politics of the IS itself: e.g. the interpretation of Leninism adopted

by the party, and the interpretation of 'stick bending' that follows from this. In both cases, and whether or not the SWP interpretation accords with Lenin's theory and practice, the result is an elitist concept of party and class (and hence party organisation). Our disagreements with the SWP concern the fundamentals of SWP politics, and not merely the complexion of the current leadership regime. This also means that, while it is necessary to demand that the party introduce more democratic practices, the root problem involves the political culture of the SWP rather than just the formulations in its constitution.

EFFECT ON SWP POLITICAL PRACTICE: SECTARIANISM

The deterioration of party democracy inevitably affects the way the party relates to the working class as a whole. After all, it is impossible for the leadership to maintain a consistent contempt for the party membership without this being translated into a contempt for the rest of the working class.

Having correctly decided to relaunch the Anti Nazi League (ANL), the party has run the ANL purely as a satellite of the SWP. Local ANL work is organised from SWP branches, rather than encouraging the building of a real united front involving forces outside the SWP by organising separate ANL meetings and building ANL branches. In the conference discussion period of 1993 comrades were instructed to make sure that the SWP branches alone organised all ANL work. The recent ANL conference was called the day before the party council to ensure that it was dominated by SWP council delegates. This sectarianism discourages many people from joining the ANL, and ensures that those non-SWP members that do join the ANL do not play an active role in it.

Again, early in 1994 the SWP leadership called an ANL demonstration in Welling (site of the Nazi headquarters), refusing to march on the same day as the YRE (the Militant organised antifascist group). By dividing the antinazi forces in this way, the party missed the opportunity to influence the many Asian and black youths organised by the YRE. In private, members of the CC admitted that the decision was a mistake, in public they defended it, attacking any comrade who criticised this sectarianism for being 'soft' on the Militant, disloyal to the party, etc.

We want an independent and democratic ANL, not as a moral principle, but because that would increase the strength of the antifascist movement.

This sectarianism is not yet as marked as that of the Communist Party or those orthodox Trotskyist groups who achieved a level of influence in the past (Militant, WRP), but the example of the ANL, and the party's sectarian abstention when the Poll Tax was first introduced, shows that it impacts the way the party relates to the movements it is involved in.

REVERSING THE PERSPECTIVES: THE DASH FOR GROWTH

The developing sectarianism and bureaucratism of the party has been made worse by the kind of 'crisis perspective' it has developed.

This argument has taken two forms. In the first place, after years in which the party's analysis of the 'downturn' allowed it to maintain a fairly sober attitude toward strike movements and campaigns, recent events have not only led the leadership, correctly, to drop the analysis of the 'downturn', they have gone on to inflate the significance of the party out of all proportion.

For example, after the protests against the Tory pit closure program the leadership claimed that if the party had twice the members it could have turned the October 1993 demonstration against closures into a march on parliament, and, to quote Cliff, if this had happened "the government would have collapsed." This kind of argument - that the Tory government manages to survive only because the comrades are not trying hard enough to recruit - has led to a 'crisis mentality' according to which any and all dissent in the party prevents us from building quickly enough and so only prolongs the lifetime of the government. Understandably enough, comrades are reluctant to feel responsible for the continued existence of the Tory government, and so prefer to keep any criticisms of the party to themselves.

The second version of the argument has been that, with the rise of fascism across Europe, and in the absence of a revolutionary left there capable of initiating united front actions to directly confront the Nazis, the burden is on the SWP to build a mass party that would galvanise the European left. This breakthrough for the SWP must take place in the coming months, or within a year or so. Otherwise, to quote Chris Harman, we will all soon be in the concentration camps.

Increasingly, party perspectives are based on the need to make this breakthrough rather than on a realistic analysis of the balance of class forces. This means that the opportunities for growth that exist are consistently exaggerated by the leadership, perspectives are 'telescoped', and comrades are placed on a permanent war footing, encouraged to engage in ever more frantic levels of activity.

The result has been the recruitment of a large number of people, many of whom are then just as quickly lost to the party. Having been recruited on the basis of activism, little or no attempt is made to educate them in revolutionary politics, with the result that they are often demoralised as soon as there is a lull in struggle, when the campaign they were recruited from ends, or because they are simply burnt out by the level of activity expected from them.

Like the WRP in the past (though not yet to the same extent) the atmosphere of 'permanent crisis' in the party, the expectation of huge gains just over the horizon, has encouraged the bureaucratisation of the party. Increasingly, the party models itself on the Bolshevik's organisation during the civil war. Some times this is even made explicit - the weekly 'party notes' at one point went so far as to argue that "one

man management is the essence of revolutionary organisation." A culture is being created in which anyone who is at all critical of the leadership is seen as distracting comrades from the activity that would secure rapid growth of the party - as one comrade put it at *Marxism '94*, any criticism of the SWP in the present period is 'poisonous'.

At the same time, all problems in the party, the failure of particular branches to grow, low paper sales in a district, poor attendance at branch meetings, etc. are blamed solely on the comrades, who are 'not convinced' by the perspectives (whether or not they are aware of this). Success or failure depends purely on the 'subjective factor'; the CC's crisis perspective is placed beyond doubt, and failure to deliver on the perspective and recruit large numbers of people is purely the fault of the party rank and file. This attitude further encourages victimisation and scapegoating.

CONCLUSION: FOR A DEMOCRATIC IS

These disagreements with the SWP need to be placed on a firmer basis by providing a thorough account of the history of the IS tradition. Nevertheless, it is clear that it is no longer realistic to expect the party to overcome its problems spontaneously, and that it is necessary to carry out work outside the SWP. This work would take place on the basis of the fundamentals of IS theory (state capitalism, theory of deflected permanent revolution, permanent arms economy, etc.), while at the same time criticising the theory of party and class (leadership, democratic centralism) developed by the tradition in the late 60's and early 70's.

Our experience of other groups means that we believe it would be a mistake to set up a long term agitational orientation toward the SWP - such an approach would soon turn us into merely sectarian critics of the party. At the same time, in the short term there is a clear need to put our criticisms of the party to the existing members.

It remains to be seen whether it will be possible to convince even the small number of comrades needed to carry out this work, as the very size of the SWP makes our criticism deeply unattractive to its members. With over six thousand members, the SWP is capable of initiating movements like the ANL (even if it organises them bureaucratically), and so party members are understandably reluctant to break with the party, out of a fear that they will be driven into the political 'wilderness'. Nevertheless, even if very few people would be immediately won over to our criticism, it may be possible to maintain a dialogue with a layer of comrades who may be won in the future. In either case, we should form an IS group to carry out this work.

★ *This document was prepared by ex-SWP comrades as the basis for further discussion. July 1994.*



INTRODUCTION TO LUXEMBURG

There should be no need to explain Rosa Luxemburg's importance as one of the giants of the Marxist tradition as both a theoretician and organiser. Her 1904 article on the nature of the revolutionary party, from which these extracts were taken, was written as a response to Lenin. Luxemburg has been presented by both anarchists and Stalinists as opposed to Lenin and Leninism (the following article has even been republished under the title *Marxism or Leninism?*, a title Luxemburg herself never used) but Luxemburg proved time and again her solidarity and basic agreement with Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

In the article, to be sure, there are points on which Luxemburg is clearly wrong against Lenin, and the tendency of her work at this time is to underestimate the need for revolutionaries to form a separate organisation, as the first step to uniting the whole working class on a revolutionary basis. It is left up to the reader to work out the extent to which Luxemburg's argument depends on Russian and German conditions at the turn of the century, and the extent to which it remains relevant today. The careful reader will find weaknesses in the article, but that shouldn't blind them to its strength, a strength which characterises Luxemburg's politics as a whole: her attitude to democracy. We are reprinting these extracts not because of their criticism of this or that aspect of Bolshevik organisation, and not because we think them correct in every detail, but because of the clarity of Luxemburg's defence of the democratic basis of Party organisation. Luxemburg explains why this democracy is not a moral requirement but flows from the fact that the working class must liberate themselves consciously. Democracy is necessary to any socialist organisation if it is to become a real organisation of the working class.

On a final note, it is worth pointing out that by 'social democracy' Luxemburg means simply socialist organisation or, more generally, Marxism itself. At that time, all Marxists described themselves as 'social democrats' and were members of social democratic parties. Luxemburg was a member of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), and the Bolsheviks themselves were a faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP). It was only in 1914 that these parties - of which the Labour Party of today is a descendant - proved themselves once and for all opposed to workers' revolution, when they supported their different governments in the first world war rather than uniting to call for general strikes and revolution across Europe to prevent war.



ROSA LUXEMBURG

Organisational Questions of Social Democracy

... Under ordinary conditions - that is, where the political domination of the bourgeoisie has preceded the socialist movement - the bourgeoisie itself instils in the working class the rudiments of political solidarity. At this stage, declares the *Communist Manifesto*, the unification of the workers is not yet the result of their own aspiration to unity but comes as a result of the activity of the bourgeoisie, "which, in order to attain its own political ends, is compelled to set the proletariat in motion."

In Russia, however, the social democracy must make up by its own efforts an entire historic period. It must lead the Russian proletarians from their present 'atomised' condition which prolongs the autocratic regime, to a class organisation that would help them to become aware of their historic objectives and prepare them to struggle to achieve these objectives...

How to effect a transition from the type of organisation characteristic of the preparatory stage of the socialist movement - usually featured by disconnected local groups and clubs, with propaganda as a principle activity - to the unity of a large, national body, suitable for concerted political action over the entire vast territory ruled over by the Russian state? That is the specific problem which the Russian social democracy has mulled over for some time.

Autonomy and isolation are the most pronounced characteristics of the old organisational type. It is, therefore, understandable why the slogan of the persons who want to see an inclusive national organisation should be 'Centralism!...'

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back, written by Lenin, is a methodical exposition of the ideas of the ultra-centralism tendency in the Russian movement. The viewpoint presented with incomparable vigour and logic in this book is that of a pitiless centralism. Laid down as principles are: 1. The necessity of selecting and constituting as a separate corps, all the active revolutionaries, as distinguished from the unorganised, though revolutionary, mass surrounding this elite.

Lenin's thesis is that the party central committee should have the privilege of naming all the local committees of the party. It should have the right to appoint the effective organs of all local bodies from Geneva to Liège, from Tomsk to Irkutsk. It should also have the right to impose on all of them its own ready made rules of party conduct. It should have the right to rule without appeal on such questions as the dissolution and reconstitution of local organisations. This way, the central committee could determine, to suit itself, the composition of the highest party organs as well as of the party congress. The central committee would be the only thinking element in the party. All other groupings would be its executive limbs...

Generally speaking, it is undeniable that a strong tendency toward centralisation is inherent in the social democratic movement. This tendency springs from the economic makeup of capitalism, which is essentially a centralising factor. The social democratic movement carries on its activity inside the large bourgeois city. Its mission is to represent, within the boundaries of the national state, the class interests of the proletariat, and to oppose those common interests to all local and group interests.

Therefore, the social democracy is, as a rule, hostile to any manifestations of localism or federalism. It strives to unite all workers and all worker organisations in a single party, no matter what national, religious, or occupational differences may exist among them. The social democracy abandons this principle and gives way to feudalism only under exceptional conditions, as in the case of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

It is clear that the Russian social democracy should not organise itself as a federative conglomerate of many national groups. It must rather become a single party for the entire empire. However, that is not really the question considered here. What we are considering is the degree of centralisation necessary inside the unified, single Russian party in view of the particular conditions under which it has to function.

Looking at the matter from the angle of the formal tasks of the social democracy in its capacity as a party of class struggle, it appears at first that the power and energy of the party are directly dependant on the possibility of centralising the party. However, these formal tasks apply to all active parties. In the case of the social democracy, they are less important than is the influence of the historic conditions.

The social democratic movement is the first in the history of class societies which reckons, in all its phases and through its entire course, on the organisation and the direct, independent action of the masses.

Because of this, the social democracy creates an organisational type that is entirely different from those common to earlier revolutionary movements, such as those of the Jacobins and the adherents of Blanqui.

Lenin seems to slight this fact when he presents in his book the opinion that the revolutionary social democrat is nothing else than a "Jacobin indissolubly joined to the organisation of the proletariat, which has become conscious of its interests."

For Lenin, the difference between the social democracy and Blanquism is reduced to the observation that in place of a handful of conspirators we have a class-conscious proletariat. He forgets that this difference implies a complete revision of our ideas on organisation and, therefore, an entirely different conception of centralism and the relations existing between the party and the struggle itself.

Blanquism did not count on the direct action of the working class. It, therefore, did not need to organise the people for the revolution. The people were expected to play their part only at the moment of revolution. Preparation for the revolution concerned only the little group of revolutionaries armed for the coup. Indeed, to assure the success of the revolutionary conspiracy, it was considered wiser to keep the mass at some distance from the conspirators. Such a relationship could be conceived by

the Blanquists only because there was no close contact between the conspiratorial activity of their organisation and the daily struggle of the popular masses.

The tactics and concrete tasks of the Blanquist revolutionaries had little connection with the elementary class struggle. They were freely improvised. They could, therefore, be decided on in advance and took the form of a ready made plan. In consequence of this, ordinary members of the organisation became simple executive organs, carrying out the orders of a will fixed beforehand, and outside of their particular sphere of activity. They became the instruments of a central committee. Here we have the second peculiarity of conspiratorial centralism - the absolute and blind submission of the party sections to the will of the centre, and the extension of this authority to all parts of the organisation.

However, social democratic activity is carried on under radically different conditions. It arises historically out of the elementary class struggle. It spreads and develops in accordance with the following dialectical contradiction. The proletarian army is recruited and becomes aware of its objectives in the course of the struggle itself. The activity of the party organisation, the growth of the proletarians' awareness of the objectives of the struggle and the struggle itself, are not different things separated chronologically and mechanically. They are only different aspects of the same process. Except for the general principles of the struggle, there do not exist for the social democracy detailed sets of tactics which a central committee can teach the party membership in the same way as troops are instructed in their training camps. Furthermore, the range of influence of the socialist party is constantly fluctuating with the ups and downs of the struggle in the course of which the organisation is created and grows.

For this reason social democratic centralism cannot be based on the mechanical subordination of the party membership to the leading party centre. For this reason, the social democratic movement cannot allow the erection of an airtight partition between the class conscious nucleus of the proletariat already in the party and its immediate popular environment, the nonparty sections of the proletariat.

Now the two principles on which Lenin's centralism rests are precisely these: 1. the blind subordination, in the smallest detail, of all party organs, to the party centre, which alone thinks, guides, and decides for all. 2. the rigorous separation of the organised nucleus of revolutionaries from its social-revolutionary surroundings...

In accordance with this view, Lenin defines his 'revolutionary social democrat' as a 'Jacobin joined to the organisation of the proletariat, which has become conscious of its class interests.'

The fact is that the social democracy is not joined to the organisation of the proletariat. It is itself the proletariat. And because of this, social democratic centralism is essentially different from Blanquist centralism. It can only be the concentrated will of the individuals and groups representative of the most class conscious, militant, advanced sections of the working class. It is, so to speak, the 'self-centralism' of the advanced sectors of the proletariat. It is the rule of the majority within its own party.

The indispensable conditions for the realisation of social democratic centralism are: 1. The existence of a large contingent of workers educated in the political struggle. 2. The possibility for the workers to develop their own political activity through direct influence on public life, in a party press, and public congresses, etc.

These conditions are not yet fully formed in Russia. The first - a proletarian vanguard, conscious of its class interests and capable of self-direction in political activity - is only now emerging in Russia. All efforts of socialist agitation and organisation should aim to hasten the formation of such a vanguard. The second condition can be had only under a regime of political liberty.

With these conclusions, Lenin disagrees violently. He is convinced that all the conditions necessary for the formation of a powerful and centralised party already exist in Russia. He declares that "it is no longer the proletarians but certain intellectuals in our party who need to be educated in the matters of organisation and discipline." He glorifies the educative influence of the factory, which, he says, accustoms the proletariat to "discipline and organisation."

Saying all this, Lenin seems to demonstrate again that his conception of socialist organisation is quite mechanistic. The discipline Lenin has in mind is being implanted in the working class not only by the factory but also by the military and the existing state bureaucracy - by the entire mechanism of the centralised bourgeois state.

We misuse words and we practice self-deception when we apply the same term - discipline - to such dissimilar notions as: 1. the absence of thought and will in a body with a thousand automatically moving hands and legs, and 2. the spontaneous coordination of the conscious, political acts of a body of men. What is there in common between the regulated docility of an oppressed class and the self-discipline and organisation of a class struggling for its emancipation?

The self-discipline of the social democracy is not merely the replacement of the authority of the bourgeois rulers with the authority of a socialist central committee. The working class will acquire the sense of the new discipline, the freely assumed self-discipline of the social democracy, not as a result of the discipline imposed on it by the capitalist state, but by extirpating, to the last root, its old habits of obedience and servility.

Centralism, in the socialist sense is not an absolute thing applicable to any phase whatsoever of the labour movement. It is a tendency, which becomes real in proportion to the development and political training acquired by the working masses in the course of their struggle.

No doubt, the absence of the conditions necessary for the complete realisation of this kind of centralisation in the Russian movement presents a formidable obstacle.

It is a mistake to believe that it is possible to substitute 'provisionally' the absolute power of a central committee (acting somehow by 'tacit delegation') for the yet unrealised rule of the majority of conscious workers in the party, and in this way replace the open control of the working masses over the party organs with the reverse control by the central committee over the revolutionary proletariat.

The history of the Russian labour movement suggests the doubtful value of such centralism. An all-powerful centre, invested, as Lenin would have it, with the unlimited right to control and intervene, would be an absurdity if its authority applied only to technical questions, such as the administration of funds, the distribution of tasks among propagandists and agitators, the transportation and circulation of printed matter. The political purpose of an organ having such great powers is understandable only if those powers apply to the elaboration of a uniform plan of action, if the central organ assumes the initiative of a vast revolutionary act.

But what has been the experience of the Russian socialist movement up to now? The most important and most fruitful changes in its tactical policy during the last ten years have not been the inventions of several leaders and even less so of any central organisational organs. They have always been the spontaneous product of the movement in ferment...

Our cause made great gains in these events. However, the initiative and conscious leadership of the social democratic organisations played an insignificant role in this development. It is true that these organisations were not specifically prepared for such happenings. However, the unimportant part played by the revolutionaries cannot be explained by this fact. Neither can it be attributed to the absence of an all-powerful central party apparatus similar to what is asked for by Lenin. The existence of such a guiding centre would have probably increased the disorder of the local committees by emphasising the difference between the eager attack of the mass and the prudent position of the social democracy. The same phenomenon - the insignificant part played by the initiative of central party organs in the elaboration of actual tactical policy - can be observed today in Germany and other countries. In general, the tactical policy of the social democracy is not something that may be 'invented'. It is the product of a series of great creative acts of the often spontaneous class struggle seeking its way forward.

The unconscious comes before the conscious. The logic of the historic process comes before the subjective logic of the human beings who participate in the historic process. The tendency is for the directing organs of the socialist party to play a conservative role. Experience shows that every time the labour movement wins new terrain those organs work it to the utmost. They transform it at the same time into a kind of bastion, which holds up advance on a wider scale...

Such inertia is due, in a large degree, to the fact that it is very inconvenient to define, within the vacuum of abstract hypotheses, the lines and forms of still non-existent political situations. Evidently, the important thing for the social democracy is not the preparation of a set of directives all ready for future policy. It is important: 1. to encourage a correct historic appreciation of the forms of struggle corresponding to the given situations, and 2. to maintain an understanding of the relativity of the current phase and the inevitable increase of revolutionary tension as the final goal of the class struggle is approached.

Granting, as Lenin wants, such absolute powers of a negative character to the top organ of the party, we strengthen, to a dangerous extent, the conservatism inherent in

such an organ. If the tactics of the socialist party are not to be the creation of a central committee but of the whole party, or, still better, of the whole labour movement, then it is clear that the party sections and federations need the liberty of action which alone will permit them to develop their revolutionary initiative and to utilise all the resources of a situation. The ultra-centralism asked by Lenin is full of the sterile spirit of the overseer. It is not a positive and creative spirit. Lenin's concern is not so much to make the activity of the party more fruitful as to control the party - to narrow the movement rather than to develop it, to bind rather than to unify it.

In the present situation, such an experiment would be doubly dangerous to the Russian social democracy. It stands on the eve of decisive battles against Tsarism. It is about to enter, or has already entered, on a period of intensified creative activity, during which it will broaden (as is usual in a revolutionary period) its sphere of influence and will advance spontaneously by leaps and bounds. To attempt to bind the initiative of the party at this moment, to surround it with a network of barbed wire, is to render it incapable of accomplishing the tremendous tasks of the hour...

The international movement of the proletariat toward its complete emancipation is a process peculiar in the following respect. For the first time in the history of civilisation, the people are expressing their will consciously and in opposition to all ruling classes. But this will can only be satisfied beyond the limits of the existing system.

Now the mass can only acquire and strengthen this will in the course of the day to day struggle against the existing social order - that is, with the limits of capitalist society.

On the one hand, we have the mass; on the other, its historical goal, located outside of existing society. On the one hand, we have the day to day struggle; on the other, the social revolution. Such are the terms of the dialectical contradiction through which the socialist movement makes its way.

It follows that this movement can best advance by tacking between the two dangers by which it is threatened. One is the loss of its mass character; the other, the abandonment of its goal. One is the danger of sinking back to the condition of a sect; the other, the danger of becoming a movement of bourgeois social reform.

That is why it is illusory, and contrary to the historic experience, to hope to fix, once for always, the direction of the revolutionary socialist struggle with the aid of formal means, which are expected to secure the labour movement against all possibilities of opportunist digression.

Marxist theory offers us a reliable instrument enabling us to recognise and combat typical manifestations of opportunism. But the socialist movement is a mass movement. Its perils are not the product of the insidious machinations of individuals and groups. They arise out of unavoidable social conditions. We cannot secure our-

selves in advance against all possibilities of opportunist deviation. Such dangers can be overcome only by the movement itself - certainly with the aid of Marxist theory, but only after the dangers in question have taken tangible form in practice.

Looked at from this angle, opportunism appears to be a product and an inevitable phase of the historic development of the labour movement.

The Russian social democracy arose a short while ago. The political conditions under which the proletarian movement is developing in Russia are quite abnormal. In that country, opportunism is to a large extent a by-product of the groping and experimentation of socialist activity seeking to advance over a terrain that resembles no other in Europe.

In view of this, we find most astonishing the claim that it is possible to avoid any possibility of opportunism in the Russian movement by writing down certain words, instead of others, in the party constitution. Such an attempt to exorcise opportunism by means of a scrap of paper may turn out to be extremely harmful - not to opportunism but to the socialist movement.

Stop the natural pulsation of a living organism, and you weaken it, and you diminish its resistance and its combative spirit - in this instance, not only against opportunism but also (and that is certainly of great importance) against the existing social order. The proposed means turn against the end they are supposed to serve.

In Lenin's overanxious desire to establish the guardianship of an omniscient and omnipotent central committee in order to protect so promising and vigorous a labour movement against any misstep, we recognise the symptoms of the same subjectivism that has already played more than one trick on socialist thinking in Russia...

The working class demands the right to make its mistakes and learn in the dialectic of history.

Let us speak plainly. Historically, the errors committed by a truly revolutionary movement are infinitely more fruitful than the infallibility of the cleverest central committee.



THE SWP VS. LENIN

BUREAUCRATIC CENTRALISM OR DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM?

Introduction

The proletariat does not recognise unity of action without freedom to discuss and criticise...There can be no mass party, no party of a class, without full clarity of essential shadings, without an open struggle between various tendencies, without informing the *masses* as to which leaders and which organisations of the party are pursuing this or that line. Without this, a party worthy of the name cannot be built.

Lenin

One of the central ideas of the revolutionary Marxist tradition is the need to unify intervention in the class struggle with the task of developing the theoretical basis of Marxism in order to make it more effective. Marxism is unique among anti-capitalist traditions in its understanding of the significance of both these elements, and its refusal to privilege one at the expense of the other. Lenin's famous remark that "Without revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary practice" does not just express the idea that theory is essential for revolutionary practice; it also means that revolutionary theory is inseparable from its practical application in the class struggle. Marx made the same point in the *Theses on Feuerbach*:

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. In practice man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.

The history of the attempt by Marxists to apply this understanding shows, however, that it is one thing to grasp it abstractly, but quite another to carry it through as a guide to action. The revolutionary left is littered with examples of those who, despite their protests to the contrary, either collapse into unthinking activism (syndicalism and 'economism') or build elaborate theoretical constructs with no bearing on, or relationship to, class struggle. Understanding the 'unity of theory and practice' in

theory is clearly not enough to make it a *reality*. However, many Marxists seem to think that repeating a phrase often enough is the same as to carrying out its meaning.

This failing has had disastrous consequences for attempts to build revolutionary groups and parties. The experience of even Marxist organisations that are also anti-Stalinist - the Trotskyists - follows a depressingly familiar pattern. They either adopt an insanely 'pure' theoreticism which only marginalises them from mainstream working class organisation and experience, heightening their sectarianism and encouraging the development of an internal regime that is ossified and inflexible; or, they become solely 'activist' organisations in which theory is the preserve of the leadership and the members are discouraged from developing anything but the most cursory understanding of the Marxist tradition. In both cases, the result is elitist.

Neither of these types of organisation has the capability to develop into a mass working class party with the ability to lead a revolution, as neither can recruit the best worker activists and develop them into revolutionary leaders with the ability to fight both inside and outside the party for the strategy and tactics necessary to win in any struggle. Without a membership capable of formulating strategy, testing the perspectives of the party in the working class movement, and, if necessary, challenging the party leadership when it makes mistakes - in other words, without a membership that is loyal to the party but not deferential to its leadership - no revolutionary organisation can develop strategy and tactics, maintain a healthy internal regime, and recruit militants.

Many working class militants are suspicious of the revolutionary left for this reason. Anybody who has spent time involved in 'Leninist' organisations will have come across workers who agree with Marxist politics but refuse to join the party because they believe it to be undemocratic and authoritarian. Many draw the conclusion that Leninism itself is at fault, as every organisation that proclaims itself Leninist appears to follow the same pattern.

Only one organisation on the British revolutionary left - the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), formerly the International Socialists (IS) - has a tradition of at least attempting to avoid these dangers. The SWP prides itself on its serious orientation on the working class movement, and also on its distinctive theoretical contribution to the development of Marxism as a tool capable of understanding an ever-changing reality. Through its theories of state capitalism, the permanent arms economy, and deflected permanent revolution, the SWP has shown the continuing relevance of Marxism for anyone who wants to overthrow class society. For this reason, the SWP is by far the largest and most visible revolutionary organisation in Britain today, and has managed to avoid, to some extent, the pitfalls that have engulfed other organisations.

This relative success has, however, been achieved despite a failing that threatens to drive the SWP down the same dead-end that the rest of the left has ended up in. The SWP has never developed a coherent theory of the party and its relationship to the working class, and, in the absence of such a theory, it exhibits features of authoritarianism and sectarianism that mark other revolutionary organisations. The SWP's

'theory' of party and class - and its practical implementation - consists of one-sided borrowings from various of Lenin's writings that are completely insensitive to the context in which they were written, their limitations, and even where Lenin was just plain wrong. As such, they are an inadequate guide to action and lead to practical political failings. This is not, then, just a theoretical question, but one that has a real impact on the growth of the revolutionary movement and its capacity to lead workers' struggle. If the conclusion drawn is that the SWP's weakness in this area has fatal consequences, revolutionaries must draw practical lessons from this fact and act accordingly.

Which Leninism?

It is impossible to understand the development of Lenin's thinking about revolutionary organisation and its relationship to the class struggle without recognising its historical context. On the question of how the working class develops political consciousness, for instance, the Lenin of 1894-96 appears to contradict the Lenin of 1902, and the Lenin of 1905 again contradicts the Lenin of 1902:

...the workers' struggle against the factory owners for their daily needs automatically and inevitably spurs the workers on to think of state, political questions, questions of how the Russian state is governed, how laws and regulations are issued, and whose interests they serve. Each clash in the factory necessarily brings the workers into conflict with the laws and representatives of state authority. (1895, *Collected Works* Vol. 5, p.115.)

...the spontaneous development of the working class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology... for the spontaneous working class movement is trade unionism..., and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie. (1902, *Collected Works* Vol. 5, p.384.)

Revolution undoubtedly teaches with a rapidity and thoroughness which appears incredible in peaceful periods of political development. And, what is particularly important, it teaches not only the leaders, but the masses as well... But the question that now confronts a militant political party is: shall we be able to teach the revolution anything? (1905, *Selected Works* pp.50-51.)

This contradiction can only be resolved, and organisational conclusions drawn for revolutionaries today, by understanding how Lenin's theoretical development is bound up with the historical experience of the Russian working class. This is not to say that Leninism is irrelevant outside of the Russian experience, as some have claimed, but it means that revolutionaries should be suspicious of schematic, one-sided applica-

tions of this or that element of Lenin's thought. An example of this schematicism is the way that Lenin's 1902 polemic *What is to be Done?*, with its attacks on the 'economist' idea that working class struggle inevitably leads to political consciousness, and its emphasis on the need for a highly centralised organisation of professional revolutionaries to bring socialism to the working class 'from without', is held up *in practice* by contemporary Leninists as the model of democratic centralist politics. But Lenin himself wrote in 1907 that "*What is to be Done?* is a controversial corrective to 'economist' distortions and it would be wrong to regard the pamphlet in any other light" (*Collected Works* Vol. 13 p.108). Lenin was right to attack the 'economists', and right to call for an independent organisation of revolutionaries, but his argument that socialist consciousness comes to the working class only 'from without' is not just a case of 'bending the stick too far'; it is wrong.

The period beginning in 1894 saw the transformation of the Russian Marxist intelligentsia from an utterly marginal force of propagandistic study circles, of necessity involved in theoretical debate about the nature of the coming revolution, the role of the peasantry in relation to the working class, and so on, into a still marginal but nonetheless significantly more agitational force with emerging success in the leadership of sectional strike activity. Lenin was involved with Martov and others in the St Petersburg League, which had a systematic orientation on the St Petersburg working class movement and regarded agitational activity as crucial to winning workers to Marxism.

The success of this movement of the intelligentsia into direct involvement with the class struggle was the spur to the development of the 'economist distortions' that Lenin later attacked in *What is to be Done?* Economism drew the conclusion that Marxists should subordinate everything to the economic struggle of the working class; that such struggle, inevitably and by stages, would lead to the development of socialist class consciousness. This tradition mirrored that of Bernstein's 'revisionism' in Germany, with its sharp division of economics from politics and its emphasis on gradualism as the key to socialist transformation of society. The logic of this position is well described by Richard Pipes:

Whereas in theory agitation was political, in practice it remained confined to economics. From agitation, which pushed politics into the background as a matter of political expedience, it was only one step to economism proper, which subordinated politics to economics as a matter of principle. (*Social Democracy and the St Petersburg Labour Movement*, 1963, p.124.)

Lenin's response to this development in *What is to be Done?* was to insist - against his own earlier writing and practice as well as against the economists - that socialist politics had to be brought to the economic struggle from the outside, from an organisation of professional revolutionaries "trained to respond to all cases of tyranny, oppression, violence and abuse, no matter what class is affected." (*What is to be*

Done?, p.69.) Spontaneous trade union activity would not lead to social democratic (Marxist) consciousness.

What is to be Done? is not only an attack on economist spontaneism, however; it is also a statement of the kind of organisational structure Lenin felt was needed if Marxists were to capitalise on the growing confidence of the working class movement and win a leadership position within it. But again, the structure that Lenin recommends cannot be understood without recognising that the revolutionaries were operating in an autocratic state under conditions of complete illegality. Lenin argues for a tightly disciplined, centralised, top-down structure and a membership limited to those who are willing to be professional revolutionaries. He did not, however, regard this as a necessity under all circumstances, but purely as a response to the political repression meted out by Tsarism. It should be remembered that in this period he still regarded Karl Kautsky as his mentor, and the German SPD as a model of political organisation in a bourgeois democracy:

in an autocratic state, the more we confine the membership of such an organisation to people who are professionally involved in revolutionary activity and who have been professionally trained in the art of combating the political police, the more difficult will it be to unearth the organisation. (*What is to be Done?*, p.121.)

Under conditions of political freedom our party will be built *entirely on the elective principle*. Under the autocracy this is impracticable for the collective thousands of workers who make up the party. (*Collected Works* Vol. 8, p.196, my emphasis)

The 1905 revolution necessitated another change of direction, with Lenin arguing that the working class is "spontaneously, instinctively social-democratic" and fighting hard against sectarian and conservative tendencies within the Bolshevik party that had developed precisely as a result of the earlier emphasis on centralism and anti-spontaneism. The 'spontaneous' invention of the soviet by the Russian working class in 1905, and the distrust of sections of the Bolsheviks towards it, showed clearly that centralised vanguard organisation alone does not guarantee political clarity, and that leadership both inside and outside the party has to be won and re-won as circumstances change.

The above sketch should show that present-day Leninists cannot simply parrot isolated quotes from Lenin and call the result a theory of party and class. It is not Lenin's attitude at any particular moment, but his *method* that needs to be applied, and it is in this light that I now want to turn to the SWP's approach to these questions.

The SWP's Leninism

The two most important attempts within the SWP tradition to understand Lenin's theory of democratic centralism are Chris Harman's pamphlet *Party and Class* (originally published in *International Socialism* journal at the end of 1968), and Cliff's four volume biography of Lenin published between 1975-79. Harman's pamphlet was written against the backdrop of the explosive growth of the revolutionary left after May 1968, a left which in many cases rejected Leninism in favour of various strands of libertarian Marxism and anarchism. Harman's pamphlet is an attempt to explain why party organisation is necessary, and to justify it theoretically. Cliff's biography, however, has a much more directly practical purpose: to defend a particular conception of party leadership through historical illustration. Harman makes this point himself in the preface to his pamphlet:

[*Party and Class*] does not begin to deal with the immense practical and political problems of building a socialist party in actual historical circumstances, of the twists and turns that are needed from time to time to ensure that the revolutionary organisation is combining principled politics with an organic connection with the most militant and active sections of the class. For this, readers are advised to follow up this pamphlet by reading the first volume of Tony Cliff's biography of Lenin." (Harman, *Party and Class*, SWP 1983, p.3.)

I want to argue that this is bad advice, because Cliff's reading of Lenin is used by the SWP leadership to justify an undemocratic, militarised and unprincipled attitude to both party and class; and that this contradicts the conception of Leninism that Harman argues for in theory. I also want to argue, however, that Harman's pamphlet itself contains confusions that carry the seeds of an authoritarian reading of Lenin.

Harman's Party and Class

Harman stresses, rightly, that the apparently contradictory elements of Lenin's thought sketched above (his emphasis on the spontaneous possibilities of working class struggle on the one hand, and his insistence that revolutionaries must organise as a vanguard on the other) can be resolved. As Harman explains:

... the real theoretical basis for [Lenin's] argument on the party is not that the working class is incapable on its own of coming to theoretical socialist consciousness... The real basis for his argument is that the level of consciousness in the working class is never uniform. However rapidly the mass of workers learn in a revolutionary situation, some sections will be more advanced than others. To merely take delight in the spontaneous transformation is to accept uncritically whatever transitory products this throws up. But these reflect the

backwardness of the class as well as its movement forward, its situation in bourgeois society as well as its potentiality of further development so as to make a revolution. Workers are not automatons without ideas. If they are not won over to a socialist world view by the intervention of conscious revolutionaries, they will continue to accept the bourgeois ideology of existing society. (Harman, p.13.)

This unevenness in the working class does not only make it necessary for Marxists to form a party; it also determines the organisational form this party should take. The aim of the party is to organise the most advanced, class-conscious workers in such a way that they can most effectively intervene in the class struggle to win the rest of the class away from bourgeois and reformist leadership. In order to achieve this, the party must be both politically principled and tactically flexible. Hence Lenin's formula of 'democratic centralism.' Again, Harman puts this well:

The revolutionary party exists so as to make it possible for the most conscious and militant workers and intellectuals to engage in scientific discussion as a prelude to concerted and cohesive action. This is not possible without general participation in party activities... 'Discipline' means acceptance of the need to relate individual experience to the total theory and practice of the party. As such it is not opposed to, but necessary prerequisite of the ability to make independent evaluations of concrete situations. That is also why 'discipline' for Lenin does not mean hiding differences that exist within the party, but rather exposing them to the full light of day so as to argue them out. (Harman, p.17.)

Democratic centralism, thus understood, has nothing in common with either its Stalinist distortion in the Communist Parties or the abstract leadership fetishism of the various Trotskyist groups which, ironically enough, mirror the Stalinist tradition in this respect. The picture Harman paints is of a party with both the most thoroughgoing internal democracy and the strongest possible external cohesiveness, with both elements essential to the party's development as a vanguard organisation of the working class in fact as well as theory. However, some of Harman's formulations contain dangers.

First, he argues that centralism is primary in the sense that it is the *prerequisite* for party democracy:

Centralism for Lenin is far from being the opposite of developing the initiative and independence of party members; it is the precondition of this. (Harman, p.17.)

Now, while it is true that centralism is necessary for the democratic decisions of the revolutionary party to have any practical impact on the class struggle, Harman is

overstating the case. In fact, his position is the exact opposite of that argued by Lenin even in 1902, at the height of his polemicising against the economists for a centralised vanguard party:

We must centralise the leadership of the movement. We must also... as far as possible *decentralise responsibility to the party* on the part of its individual members, of every participant in its work, and of every circle belonging to or associated with the party. This decentralisation is an essential prerequisite of revolutionary centralism and an *essential corrective to it*. (Lenin, *Letter to a Comrade on Our Organisational Tasks*, 1902.)

Harman's position carries the danger that democracy can be treated as useful or necessary only when it complements the centralism of the party; but if this is the case, then it isn't really democracy at all. Sometimes revolutionary democracy is directed against the centralised organs of the party, and with good reason. Think of the numerous occasions during the 1905 and 1917 revolutions when the party organs were to the right of the mass of the party membership and had to be pushed from below to respond properly to changes in the objective situation. Lenin is right: in these circumstances, the democracy of the party is what shifts it, not its centralised 'will.' If centralism is to be a political centralism, and avoid the dangers of bureaucratism and authoritarianism, it must be based on a political culture of independent and critical thinking from the party membership.

Harman's second weakness is related to the first. Both Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky criticised Lenin's formulations in *What is to be Done?* as being substitutionist and bureaucratic. Harman gives the two most famous quotes:

The unconscious comes before the conscious. The logic of history comes before the subjective logic of the human beings who participate in the historic process. The tendency is for the directing organs of the socialist party to play a conservative role. (Rosa Luxemburg, *Organisational Questions of Russian Social Democracy*, 1904, in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, Pathfinder 1970, p.121.)

the organisation of the party substitutes itself for the party as a whole; then the Central Committee substitutes itself for the organisation; and finally 'the dictator' substitutes himself for the Central Committee. (Trotsky, quoted in Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed*, Oxford 1954, p.90.)

Harman's response is that bureaucratism is only a danger for certain types of organisation:

In the writings of Lenin there is an ever-present implicit recognition of the problems that worry Luxemburg and Trotsky so much. But there is not the same fatalistic succumbing to them. There is an increasing recognition that *it*

is not organisation as such, but particular forms and aspects of organisation that give rise to these. (Harman, p.11, my emphasis.)

This is an inadequate response to the very real problems Luxemburg and Trotsky raise. Whilst it is undoubtedly true Lenin was right against both Luxemburg and Trotsky in his organisational formulations, it is simply complacent to assume, as Harman does and Lenin never did, that the organisational form itself is a sufficient guard against the dangers of substitutionism and bureaucratism. Such distortions arise organically in any organisation that has a central leadership and they must be recognised and consciously fought. This is not because of 'human nature', or because 'power corrupts', as the anarchists would have it, but because the development of a party is always uneven. As the class struggle rises, new leaders emerge, but when the struggle ebbs, these leaders become separated from those that put them in power, they begin to develop their own interests (mostly in clinging on to their power), and a low level of struggle means that the rank and file lack the confidence to hold them to account. In this way, the development of bureaucracy is rooted in the combined and uneven development of the class struggle.

Once again, the best guarantee against such distortions is for party democracy to act as a limit on the centralism of the party organs and leadership. This is not to argue for federalism, or some kind of libertarian alternative to Leninism, and is the very opposite of fatalism, as it recognises that the party regime must be continuously shaped and reshaped through the experience of the struggle. It is simply to recognise the reality that Luxemburg and Trotsky were right to attack the dangers of bureaucratism regardless of the fact that they were wrong against Lenin in the specific circumstances of the debate surrounding *What is to be Done?*

Harman's argument that only particular kinds of organisation are prone to bureaucratism leads him to confusion on the debate between Lenin and Luxemburg. He suggests that Luxemburg's critique of Lenin is really directed against the German SPD:

there is a continual equivocation in Luxemburg's writings on the role of the party... Such equivocation cannot be understood without taking account of the concrete situation Luxemburg was really concerned about. She was a leading member of the SPD, but always uneasy about its mode of operation. (Harman, p.8.)

This suspicion of the SPD is hardly a criticism of Luxemburg! It is important to recognise that in the period 1903-04, when Lenin was attacking opportunism and revisionism, his target was not Karl Kautsky - Lenin still regarded Bolshevism as a continuation of Kautskyism - but Bernstein. It was Luxemburg who recognised the conservatism of Kautskyism and her attacks on Lenin have to be understood in this light. When she argues against Lenin that organisational methods may *encourage* opportunism and bureaucratism, not guard against them, she is right and Lenin is

wrong, and the experience of Kautskyism is proof of this. As Trotsky wrote in 1934, in an article defending Luxemburg against Stalin:

There is no gainsaying that Rosa Luxemburg impassionately counterposed the spontaneity of mass actions to the 'victory-crowned' conservative policy of the German social democracy especially after the revolution of 1905. This counterposition had a thoroughly revolutionary and progressive character. At a much earlier date than Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg grasped the retarding character of the ossified party and trade union apparatus and began a struggle against it. (Trotsky, *Luxemburg and the Fourth International*, in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, p.452.)

One does not need to be a defender of spontaneism or an opponent of Lenin to see that Harman's metaphysical idea that democratic centralist organisation is in some way inoculated against bureaucratism does not stand up to scrutiny. When Leninists talk of the vanguard party, of the correct balance between democracy and centralism, they should be wary of assuming that declaring it to be so is sufficient to make it so. The revolutionary party has a duty to prove to the working class that it is capable and worthy of leadership. Democratic centralism is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for the revolutionary party to lead a revolution. And the party's centralism, as Luxemburg suggests, must arise from the actions and will of the most class-conscious sections of the working class. If it does not, it will inevitably mark a break with the norms of the revolutionary Marxist tradition.

The fact is that the social democracy is not *joined* to the organisation of the proletariat. It is itself the proletariat. And because of this, social democratic centralism is essentially different from Blanquist centralism. It can only be the concentrated will of the individuals and groups representative of the most class-conscious, militant, advanced sections of the working class. It is, so to speak, the 'self-centralism' of the advanced sectors of the proletariat. It is the rule of the majority within its own party.

The indispensable conditions for the realisation of social democratic centralism are: (1) The existence of a large contingent of workers educated in the political struggle. (2) The possibility for the workers to develop their own political activity through direct influence on public life, in a party press, and public congresses, etc. (Luxemburg, op. cit. p.119.)

Cliff's Lenin

If Harman's *Party and Class* contains the seeds of an authoritarianism quite alien to the spirit of the IS tradition, surely Cliff's monumental four volume biography of Lenin can act as a corrective?

Sadly, this is not the case. Cliff's reading of Lenin, particularly in volume one, suffers from the same weaknesses as Harman's pamphlet. However, these weaknesses are amplified by the fact that Cliff makes Lenin's tactic of 'stick bending' (or, rather, his own interpretation of it) the organising principle of the book. This is the point at which the argument is no longer simply one of theory; a close reading of Cliff's book shows that the authoritarian and undemocratic internal practices of the SWP discussed elsewhere in this pamphlet have their roots here.

Cliff's study of Lenin is inseparable from the history of the SWP. It was at least partly written as an intervention in an internal debate the IS conducted in the late 1960s as to whether to move from a federal structure to a centralised, Leninist organisation. As a result, the book still has the status of a cadre's handbook in the organisation - in early 1994 leading comrades and organisers were once again being encouraged to study it - and the leadership techniques the party have adopted show its influence clearly.

The book suffers, however, from a schematicism that is at odds with the spirit of Lenin's writings, and from the fact that it exhibits a method that elevates one tactic - stick bending - to the status of a general strategy for party building. So, what is Cliff's understanding of 'stick bending', and how does it relate to Lenin's? Cliff's clearest statement of the method is this:

The uneven development of different aspects of the struggle made it necessary always to look for the key link in every concrete situation. When this was the need for study, for laying the foundations of the first Marxist circles, Lenin stressed the central role of study. In the next stage, when the need was to overcome circle mentality, he would repeat again and again the importance of industrial agitation. At the next turn of the struggle, when 'economism' needed to be smashed, Lenin did this with a vengeance. He always made the task of the day quite clear, repeating what was necessary *ad infinitum* in the plainest, heaviest, most single-minded hammer-blow pronouncements. (Cliff, *Lenin* Volume One, Pluto 1975, p.67.)

Leaving aside that final sentence for a moment, the rest is pure hagiography. It gives a picture of a Lenin who always understood the full complexity of any given situation, and deliberately exaggerated the most important task in order to shift his comrades in the right direction. It is a top-down view of Lenin's role and completely at odds with historical fact. There is no evidence, for instance, that Lenin made the shift towards industrial agitation in the period 1894-96 as the result of some great tactical genius; he was just as convinced as everybody else at the time that economic agitation could provide the solution to the politicisation of the class struggle. In other words, his actions in that period reflect a learning process, not a worked-out strategy. To say this is not to deny that Lenin recognised sooner than most the dangers inherent in the agitational approach; it is simply to insist that very often when Lenin

argued something he later rejected he wasn't doing it for tactical reasons but because he happened to genuinely believe it at the time. And should this be so surprising?

Lenin did sometimes practice 'stick bending.' Given the complexity of any given period, and the political unevenness within the party as well as within the class, there is no doubt that sometimes it is necessary to stress the main task - 'seize the key link' in Lenin's words - in order to move the party in the correct direction. However, four important points need to be considered:

- Stick bending is about tactics. Emphasising the key point is not the same thing as reducing reality to one point, and Lenin never did so. Cliff, on the other hand, suggests Lenin's method is essentially to reduce everything to one idea and then repeat it '*ad infinitum*', 'single mindedly' and with 'hammer blows'. This is a completely anti-democratic notion, as it rests on the idea that the party membership have the role of extras, dupes carrying out the 'task of the day' when directed by an omniscient leadership.
- Stick bending is not the only method for coping with the complexity of reality and not always the most appropriate. Sometimes open debate is the only way to carry an argument, even though it may take longer to move the party, and so from the point of view of the bureaucrat is 'less efficient'. Lenin never dodged such arguments when they were necessary. (Just two examples: the debates at the 1903 congress of the RSDLP as to what kind of organisation was necessary; and the debate about the treaty of Brest-Litovsk.) Indeed, this is generally the way that Lenin attempted to win the party to his positions. When differences of strategy and tactics emerged, Lenin always fought openly and encouraged his opposition to do so also. This is in marked contrast to the 'stick bending' political culture of the SWP leadership, where such debate is regarded as a diversion from the tasks of party building, not essential to them.
- Overuse of stick bending can exacerbate the problems of unevenness within the party, not solve them. If the party's tasks are always stated in an exaggerated, one-sided way, the party membership can develop an exaggerated, one-sided way of carrying them out. The result is that the party's members do not develop as fully-rounded Marxist cadres, capable of acting independently, but become politically schizophrenic, zig-zagging from one one-sided perspective to another. The result is the sort of 'monochromatic Marxism' that characterises the SWP today.
- Stick bending is only effective if the party correctly identifies the key link to seize. In order to achieve this, the highest level of debate and analysis is necessary. A party that is unable to develop a cadre for the reasons given above is unable to properly debate its tasks. The result is the intensification of the tendency for the key link to be passed down from the leadership without any real discussion. Even if the key link is correctly identified, the danger is that it will be implemented mechanically and thus ineffectively.

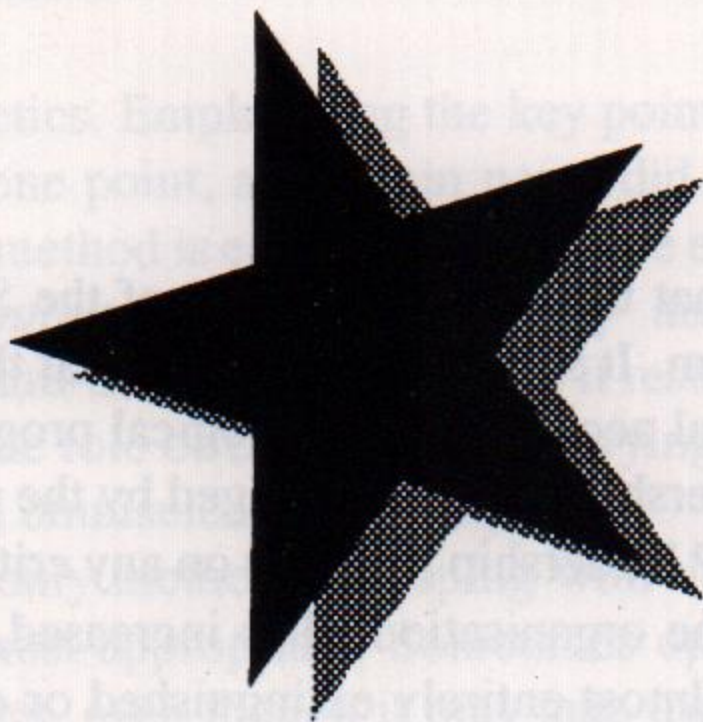
In short, Cliff's reading of Lenin has disastrous consequences for the reality of democracy within the revolutionary party, despite the richness of the IS tradition which he was instrumental in building. His ground-breaking work on the theory of state capitalism saved the revolutionary Marxist tradition from the twin spectres of Stalinism and orthodox Trotskyism. His theory of the party - and more importantly, its implementation in the SWP - threatens to alienate the working class from that tradition.

Conclusion

It is our argument that the political culture of the SWP is based on a bureaucratic distortion of Leninism. It should also be clear that the anti-democratic norms of the SWP are no historical accident, but the logical progression of a theory of organisation held by the leadership and unchallenged by the membership. In recent years the shrillness of the SWP leadership's attacks on any criticism of its methods - from both inside and outside the organisation - has increased, and the cadre of the party has consequently been almost entirely extinguished or demoralised. This is not to suggest that the SWP is on the verge of collapse - it is still a large organisation, capable of interventions in the class struggle that have genuine short-term success. It is, however, to suggest that the SWP is incapable of building or maintaining a cadre; and that, therefore, it is incapable of leading the revolution its members are fighting for.

★ *This article was written by ex-SWP comrades, September 1994.*

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