

Propaganda and agitation: what they mean

Excerpts from discussions on this by AWL and our forerunners, and George Plekhanov's classic discussion from 1891.

From "IS and Ireland" (1969), by Sean Matgamna, Rachel Lever, and Joe Wright

HOW MARTYNOV, HAVING RENDERED PLEKHANOV MORE PROFOUND, WAS REBORN IN IS

For revolutionaries, there can be no contradiction between the content of agitation, propaganda and theory. The difference is one of form, of style and technique, and of scale. The content and meaning does not differ according to whether action might or might not follow, or whether that action might be on mass scale or on a tiny scale. This is the essential meaning of the well known definition of Plekhanov: "A propagandist presents many ideas to one or a few persons; an agitator present only one or a few ideas, but he presents them to a mass of people".

Marks, having no conception of the purpose of demands, departed quite explicitly from this formula: "Of course, this very situation" (of contradictions, with the troops' presence being approved) "increases the need to expose on every occasion *in propaganda and discussion* [our emphasis] the role the British troops are playing; and the side on which they must ultimately come down. But those who conclude that *raising the demand* for withdrawal *in the present situation* [emphasis Marks] must therefore follow, do not understand the difference between propaganda and agitation".

We say one thing in "discussion and propaganda" and another "in the present situation".

Ha continued: "Marxism is not an alternative description of the world but a guide to action. And slogans are not just an expression of the fine feelings of those who utter them, or even a stylistic device for the summing up of a political argument. For those involved in a struggle they are calls to action".

Marks might have been paraphrasing Martynov, in that passage which Lenin (in *What is to be Done*) sarcastically described as rendering Plekhanov more profound. "By agitation, in the strict sense of the word, we would understand calling the masses to certain concrete actions..." In reply, Lenin demonstrated that all types of political writing were more or less directly connected with "action". One couldn't make that a criterion for separating out one type of work.

"To single out a third sphere, or third function, of practical activity" [as well as propaganda and agitation] "and to include in this third function 'calling the masses to certain concrete actions' is sheer nonsense, because the 'call', as a single act, either naturally and inevitably supplements the theoretical tract, propagandist pamphlet, and agitational speech or represents a purely executive function". He gave an example of a "concrete action", the signing of petitions: "The call for this action comes directly from the theoreticians, the propagandists and the agitators, and, indirectly, from those workers who carry the petition lists to the factories and to private houses to get signatures". (See Chapter III section B for the rest of the argument).

Explicit though he is about "calls to action", Marks is still not clear what it's all about. In discussions, when challenged to define agitation and propaganda, he and other EC members have trotted out the Plekhanov definition, not realising where they had departed from it. The practice, however, shows clearly just which method and definition they do adhere to.

The point about the Plekhanov formulation is, of course that the "single idea" put over in agitation is not just any old idea but a correct idea; not in antagonism to the larger complex of ideas that is-propaganda, but flowing out of it, and again leading back to it. Taking this definition together with IS's practice, the only thing it can mean is that you tell most of your audience (if only by your failure to tell them otherwise, not to mention polemics such as Marks' - in which he repeatedly emphasises that the troops are indispensable to the Catholic workers) that the troops "for the moment" and "in the present situation" are doing a good job; while you tell an initiated few, who probably don't really need to be told anyway, that things aren't so simple.

The justification for having a different line for agitation and propaganda was that given by Marks and Martynov: that agitation must lead to action, but propaganda is about the general, overall picture, about the future. Only propaganda is seen as educational. Martynov, the Russian "Economist", counterposed agitation leading to action to Plekhanov's propaganda and agitation, because he wanted to fight for reformism and to "free" his reformist tactics from a too rigorous connection with revolutionary Marxist propaganda and the agitation spun from it. Marks and IS use the very same distinction, for the reason that they went to free themselves to react impressionistically with regard to the long term interests of the class. They wanted to free themselves from theory, programme and basic principles.

EDUCATION AND ACTION.

To say that agitation and propaganda are both essentially educational is not to say that they don't lead to action. It is to say that education and action must be integrated, must interact, that the most important and chief reason for anything to be said and done is that it educates the masses and raises their consciousness, preferably in action. The distinction between agitation and propaganda being a matter of scale, the immediate effect often varies in scale.

The agitation of a mass party, counting among its members hundreds or thousands of the grass roots leaders of the working class, might lead more directly to mass action - because it is directed immediately to the masses - than would its propaganda, or the propaganda and agitation of a much smaller group.

Even if one accepted the view of Marks and Martynov, that there is a fundamental difference in aims between agitation and propaganda, it is yet another question whether this can be applied to IS. If it is not big enough for its agitation to be a "call to action" in any practical sense, then even if one wants to follow Martynov one is nevertheless bound by the Plekhanov conception.

On the level of a factory, or maybe in certain conditions in an industry, IS can agitate and can aspire to have mass influence which can at times either lead to action or affect action being taken. On the level of national and international politics, however' IS is confined to a propaganda role. On Ireland, propaganda and agitation converge for a group like IS. IS could only agitate in the Plekhanov sense, seizing on illuminating facts to illustrate and highlight propaganda, summing up and underlining an argument in a slogan or demand. We could not make "calls to action" to the masses in Derry and Belfast, or even "to the masses" in Britain - except in the spirit of propaganda and education. Any other estimation of IS's influence is illusionary.

From "The Left and the July Crisis", 1972, by Sean Matgamna and Martin Thomas

[A discussion of the response of the left to the mass strike movement when the "Pentonville Five" dockers were jailed]

The I.S. couldn't bring itself to call for the general strike - even in the special issue of Socialist Worker brought out after the Five were jailed! By Monday [24 July] however, they had decided to tag along with the growing workers' movement. Posters appeared proclaiming "International Socialists say General Strike Will Free The Five".

Still no attempt to explain the general strike weapon, still no concerted effort to say much beyond "good on you lads, keep it up."

Then on Wednesday [26th], after the dockers were released, the general strike slogan was dropped. Or was it? A leading member of I.S., Duncan Hallas, speaking in Liverpool on Wednesday evening, said that the call for a general strike to smash the Act should be raised as "propaganda, not agitation".

Now he said this while arguing against a call of no demobilisation of the strike movement before the Act was smashed. So, in ordinary plain speech presumably he meant he was against a general strike to smash the Act - or at least, against doing anything to achieve it. Propaganda, for IS, apparently means to talk of "wouldn't it be nice if", unembarrassed by any close link with practical activity. Instead of agitation being the antennae of the propaganda message, its "loud-hailer", organically linked to it and all the time striving to increase the power of the agitational message to focus workers towards the more rounded out and explained propaganda - instead of this IS's agitation relates only to "what is happening". It is not the link between what is happening and what we want to see happening - that is, our revolutionary socialist programme.

I.S. do not understand that what is propaganda (many ideas communicated to a few people) in one situation, requiring patient and exhaustive explanation, persuasion and many-sided examination, can be grasped with dramatic speed in another and can be put forward "agitatively". Thus the action of the court in jailing the five dockers illuminated - perhaps only momentarily- the connections between the state, the courts and the ruling class, and the class itself began to move, in the only direction open to it, into action. I.S. does not understand this because it sees agitation and propaganda as essentially separate things and not a unified complex of ideas, with the difference being only one of technique rather than of content, and therefore that the class struggle demands rapid and constant reappraisal of the balance between the content of agitation and propaganda.

Thus I.S. raised the call for general strike for the first time in Socialist Worker in an issue headlined "Victory" later that week. They call for a general strike when everything has died down and it is a pious wish for the future. But not when it is a live issue.

I.S. had made no serious analysis of the situation the working class faced in relation to the Tory Government and the Industrial Relations Act. In the months building up to the Pentonville crisis, its approach was epitomised by one Socialist Worker headline: "Pay: use your muscle for more". With sit-ins,

flying pickets, important demands for a shorter working week, a massive offensive to bind trade unions to the state, Socialist Worker tailed behind, putting the main stress on... higher wages!

There was no serious preparation. In areas like Manchester where the belated call for a general strike arrived only on the Wednesday afternoon, I.S. members were left bewildered, without a line, without a perspective for the movement around them.

True to type, IS went in for shallow "agitation" derived from no analysis, related to no perspective. IS has essentially an approach of social-democratic fishing in the stream of the movement with the goal of organisational self-promotion, in the spirit of petty speculation - a truly petty bourgeois attitude.

It tags along with the working class like an outsider trying to get in on a gang - willing to perform all sorts of service tasks, to praise "self-activity" ever so highly. But when the class starts moving this outsider recoils in surprise, fear, and confusion, unable to comprehend the potential of the self-activity he calls for, only to tag on afterwards, always a day late.

I.S is trapped in its definitions of agitation and propaganda, definitions borrowed directly from the definition of Martynov which Lenin criticised in *What is to be Done?* Thus they define agitation as "calling the masses to certain concrete actions", "promising certain palpable results"; and propaganda as "the revolutionary elucidation of the whole of the present system or partial manifestations of it". Having got into this stance they then cannot escape from an oscillation between the light-minded adventurism of calling for a general strike without preparation, without explanation, without educating its members to use the call for a general strike seriously and to link it to immediate practical steps; and at the other pole, the conservatism of lagging behind the broadest advanced layers of the class during a rising tide of militancy. The organic links between agitation, propaganda and theory are broken.

From "What a revolutionary party is and is not", 2010, by Sean Matgamna

The cry for a "Revolutionary Party" often works against the revolutionary adequacy it has failed adequately to anatomise and define: it is a snare. This fetish too arises from misreading cause and effect: like the medieval architects who copied the appearance of ancient buildings but had no idea of how exactly it worked: they would make things like columns as mere decoration, that had functions in the structures they tried to copy.

Adequacy, beyond sectist convenience and streamlining of decision-making, is unlikely to be the outcome of creating an infallible "party" Pope, and a college of Party Cardinals - as this project almost always does, and has done in the history of the post-Trotsky "Trotskyists".

Again: such a structure served the Stalinists in what they were really trying to do (as distinct from what they said they were trying to do), but cannot conceivably serve a genuine left wing movement.

"The party" comes in practice to be seen as self-sufficient, and to have interests of its own that it can serve irrespective of the working class. This is a sectist caricature of the pre-1914 Second international approach. The apparatus comes to be seen as in practice more important than the working class. The history of the British Trotskyist movement in the last 30 years contains some terrible examples of this.

The idea that the party is, or can be, counterposed to the working class, and can be set adrift from the core ideas of Plekhanov, Lenin, Trotsky, and others, summarised above, is a source of endless ideological corruption in the would-be left.

Any argument will do to win a point or sustain "a line", and never mind the political education of the working class. Agitation becomes autonomous from propaganda and programme.

The SWP is the great contemporary practitioner in Britain now of the approach that any argument will do; but the approach starts, like so many of the ailments of the kitsch left, with the Stalinist Communist International, which learned to rationalise from the politics of the Russian Stalinist government, whatever they were at a given moment.

To see the revolutionary party only as a "machine" is radically to misunderstand its nature and its prime task - that of education.

To go beyond that to the view that the apparatus can say and do anything that "builds the party", more or less irrespective of the effects on the consciousness of the working class, is a vicious and essentially Stalinist travesty of the idea of "building the party".

Often, by way of demagogy and the dominance of agitation-led activity to "build the party", this travesty works against the education of the working class.

Only the conscious struggle of the living Marxists, reacting specifically and concretely, focusing and redefining Marxism, can make of Marxism a consistently revolutionary instrument for the working class, for separating out and maintaining scientific consciousness in the working class.

If there is no irreplaceable function of this type for the Leninist party, then there is no need for our party. Were it not for the ideological task of the revolutionary party of the working class, were it not for the peculiar problems of the proletariat in that respect, then the working class could be expected to improvise the necessary organisation for the seizure of power, as the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie have done. If all the proletariat needs is an organisation, then the tightly knit revolutionary organisations are just sects, premature and almost certainly irrelevant.

If what the proletariat needs is only a machine, then it does not need to have its militants labouring for decades in advance of the maturation of the situation where it requires an uprising.

The consequences of this are that our party is in the first place and irreplaceably a selection of politically conscious militants committed to activity in the struggles for the party's goals. It must thus be selected on the basis of a minimum of political education and knowledge, and commitment...

For Marxists there is no such thing as agitation that does not enlighten and educate the working class about the system as a whole. But if "building the party" is the goal, then almost any agitation that attracts interest can make sense. "Action" becomes all-important, irrespective of the conditions, and almost irrespective of what action.

Appendix: Plekhanov on agitation and propaganda, from "The Tasks of the Social-Democrats in the Famine"

If I assert that the promotion of the growth of the class consciousness of the proletariat is the sole purpose and the direct and sacred duty of the Socialists, then this does not mean that the contemporary Socialists stand for propaganda, for propaganda alone, and for nothing but propaganda.

In the broad sense of the word this is perhaps true, but only in the very broad sense.

When at the International Congress in Paris in 1889 the Socialists resolved to strive for the eight-hour day they obviously had it in mind that workers' demonstrations in favour of their resolution would be a marvellous method of propagating their ideas. But a demonstration is at the same time a method of agitation.

In general it is not easy to draw the line between agitation and what is usually called propaganda.

Agitation is also propaganda, but propaganda that takes place in particular circumstances, that is in circumstances in which even those who would not normally pay any attention are forced to listen to the propagandist's words. Propaganda is agitation that is conducted in the normal everyday course of the life of a particular country.

Agitation is propaganda occasioned by events that are not entirely ordinary and that provoke a certain upsurge in the public mood. Socialists would be very bad politicians if they were not to use such notable events for their own ends.

Let us suppose that the agitation in favour of the eight-hour day has been crowned with success. Frightened by constantly growing pressure from the workers' movement, the bourgeoisie has yielded. In all civilised countries the law has limited the working day to eight hours.

This is a great victory for socialism but the question arises:

There were of course Socialists among them. There were many Socialists who played a leading role, stepping out in front and sweeping the hesitant and the indecisive along in their wake.

But were there really then people who were hesitant and indecisive? Why did they hesitate, why were they indecisive?...

Probably because they had not fully appreciated the benefits of the eight-hour day and because, on a general level, not having assimilated socialist ideas, they were not yet imbued with the thirst for the battle for a better future that is aroused by a consistent and ordered revolutionary outlook.

In a word, these people were not yet Socialists. But now look at what has happened.

The Socialists have drawn people who were not yet Socialists into the struggle for a cause that will be very useful to socialism. In other words, people who were not yet Socialists have already been working for socialism.

And it is agitation that has done this!

Because of this Socialists can use for the cause not just the forces that belong to them at the present time, but also those that will belong to them only subsequently. What has happened is rather like drawing on the socialist account which history will pay for. And this payment will bring the victory of socialism significantly closer.

Propaganda, in the strict sense of the word, would lose all historical significance if it were not accompanied by agitation.

Propaganda conveys the correct views to dozens, hundreds, thousands of people. But people holding the correct views only become historical activists when they exert a direct influence on public life. And influence on the public life of contemporary civilised countries is unthinkable without influence on the mass, i.e. without agitation. (In barbaric despotisms [such as Tsarist Russia] things are different: there the mass has no importance. But we are not talking about them.)

Consequently agitation is essential for any party that wishes to have historical meaning. A sect may be content with propaganda in the narrow sense of the word, but a political party never.

If I had to clarify further the relationship between agitation and propaganda I should add that the propagandist conveys many ideas to a single person or to a few people, whereas the agitator conveys only one or a few ideas, but he conveys them to a whole mass of people, sometimes to almost the entire population of a particular locality.

But history is made by the mass.

Consequently agitation is the aim of propaganda: I conduct propaganda so that I shall have the opportunity to transfer to agitation.

However, let us return to our example.

We supposed that the Socialists had managed to secure an eight-hour day by law. Such a law brings very great benefit to the working class. Even the least advanced, least comprehending and most backward workers soon become convinced of this once it has become a reality.

And they all know that the eight-hour day was introduced on the initiative of the Socialists.

For this reason all workers, even the most backward, will be thoroughly convinced that the realisation of at least some socialist demands benefits the working class. And this knowledge will in any case bring them incomparably closer to a complete sympathy with socialism than a complete indifference to socialist teaching would have done. But let us go further.

By increasing the worker's leisure time, the eight-hour day gives him the opportunity for greater intellectual development and consequently for the easier assimilation of socialist ideas. That means that in this way too the eight-hour day brings nearer the inevitable reckoning: it 'hastens the social revolution'...

We have seen that [social relations in Russia] are changing very rapidly. The mutual relationship between the social forces does, clearly, change with them. The autocracy weakens as the historical soil that has nurtured it crumbles and decomposes.

At the same time some forces are growing stronger and stronger, and it is the collision with these forces that drives [autocracy] to its ruin.

This means that, while our propaganda is training revolutionaries, history creates the revolutionary milieu essential for their activity; while we are preparing the leaders of the revolutionary mass, the officers and NCOs of the revolutionary army, this very army is being created by the inevitable course of social development.

But [if that is so, must we not] describe our activity as fruitless or unproductive? On the contrary, is it not absolutely necessary and uniquely productive from the revolutionary point of view?

On the other hand it is clear that, as long as the individuals that we have 'propagandised' exert no direct revolutionary influence on the mass, they are only its leaders in theory.

If they are to become its leaders in reality they will have to influence them in the revolutionary sense.

That is where agitation comes into its own. Thanks to it the necessary link between the 'heroes' and the 'crowd', between the mass and its leaders is established and strengthened. The more strained matters become, the more the old social edifice will rock, and the more rapidly the revolution approaches, the more important agitation will become.

To it belongs the principal role in the drama that we call the social revolution.

From this it follows that, if the Russian Socialists want to play an active role in the coming Russian revolution, they must know how to become agitators.

This is essential. But it is not easy. The task of the agitator involves putting into circulation in each particular case the maximum possible number of revolutionary ideas in a form that is accessible to the mass.

For every mistake he makes one way or another a harsh punishment awaits the agitator.

If he overestimates the revolutionary mood of the mass he will at best remain unintelligible, but he may be ridiculed or even assaulted.

If, on the other hand, because of extreme caution he puts to the mass demands that it has already outgrown in its rapid revolutionary development, he will fall into the awkward position of agitator-brake, an agitator who inspires the crowd with 'moderation and tender conscience'.

The whole skill of the agitator consists in his ability to avoid such excesses.

But if he has this skill he has no need to fear failure. His task will be carried out of its own accord. You may perhaps say that he is giving the mass nothing: he is only giving fully conscious expression to the attitude that it already holds, which it is not itself aware of. But in this lies the secret of his influence and the guarantee of his future successes.

Seeing in his words merely the expression of its own demands, the mass willingly follows him. And... it may even itself push ahead of the agitator.

Realising that only yesterday it was still frightened by its boldness and novelty it rapidly goes further, inclining to more daring demands.

In this way, learning from its own experience, carried along by its own movement, encouraged by its own success, it gradually, but on the other hand assuredly, becomes more and more revolutionary, until in the end it deals with a single decisive movement the death-blow to the existing order.

But when the edifice of this order, made shaky, weak and decrepit by history, has shattered, new tasks will unfold before it, it will have to build things better in its new home, not falling into the net of the political exploiters, flatterers and tricksters.

Then the services and the directions of its devoted agitator-friends will be just as important for it as they were earlier in the heart of the struggle with the old order.

Orators are born, according to the well-known saying. Agitators are also 'born' and no science can replace the inborn agitational gift. Agitation cannot be conducted according to a particular pattern. But this does not prevent us from thinking about its significance and preparing for it with all the means at our disposal at a time when we can foresee that there will soon be a broad scope for agitational activity.

A necessary condition for this activity is a merger of the revolutionary forces that have already been prepared.

Through circle propaganda we can involve people who have no connection with one another and do not even suspect one another's existence. Of course the absence of organisation always affects propaganda, but it does not make it impossible.

In epochs of great social upheaval, when the political atmosphere is charged with electricity and when here and there for the most varied, most unforeseen reasons there are increasingly frequent explosions that testify to the approach of the revolutionary storm, in short when it is necessary either to agitate or to rally to the flag — in these epochs only organised revolutionary forces can exert a serious influence on the course of events.

The individual is then powerless, and only units of a higher order are equal to the revolutionary task: revolutionary organisations.

Organisation is the first, the essential step. However insignificant the prepared revolutionary forces of contemporary Russia, they will be increased tenfold by organisation.

Counting their forces and stationing them where appropriate, the revolutionaries set to work.

By means of spoken and printed propaganda they spread the correct view of the causes of the present famine through all strata of the population.

Wherever the mass is not yet sufficiently advanced to understand their teaching, they give it, as it were, object lessons. They appear wherever it protests, they protest with it, they explain to it the meaning of its own movement and hence they increase its revolutionary preparedness...