

Additional reading on the party: Trotsky, Shachtman, Cannon, Matgamna

Trotsky, Speech on the role of the party, Second Congress of Comintern, 1920

COMRADES! It may seem fairly strange that three-quarters of a century after the appearance of the Communist Manifesto discussion should arise at an International Communist Congress over whether a party is necessary or not. Comrade Levi has underscored just this aspect of the discussion, pointing out that for the great majority of the Western European and American workers this question was settled long ago, and that in his opinion a discussion of this question will hardly help raise the prestige of the Communist International.

For my part I proceed from the assumption that there is a rather sharp contradiction between the march of historical events and the opinion expressed here with such Marxist magnanimity to the effect that the broad masses of workers are already excellently aware of the necessity of the party. It is self-evident that if we were dealing here with Messrs. Scheidemann, Kautsky or their English co-thinkers, it would, of course, be unnecessary to convince these gentlemen that a party is indispensable to the working class. They have created a party for the working class and handed it over into the service of bourgeois and capitalist society.

But if what we have in mind is the proletarian party, then it is observable that in various countries this party is passing through different stages of its development. In Germany, the classic land of the old Social Democracy, we observe a titanic working class, on a high cultural level, advancing uninterruptedly in its struggle, dragging in its wake sizable remnants of old traditions. We see, on the other hand, that precisely those parties which pretend to speak in the name of the majority of the working class, the parties of the Second International, which express the moods of a section of the working class, compel us to pose the question whether the party is necessary or not.

Just because I know that the party is indispensable, and am very well aware of the value of the party, and just because I see Scheidemann on the one side and, on the other, American or Spanish or French syndicalists who not only wish to fight against the bourgeoisie but who, unlike Scheidemann, really want to tear its head off-for this reason I say that I prefer to discuss with these Spanish, American and French comrades in order to prove to them that the party is indispensable for the fulfillment of the historical mission which is placed upon them-the destruction of the bourgeoisie. I will try to prove this to them in a comradely way, on the basis of my own experience, and not by counterposing to them Scheidemann's long years of experience and saying that for the majority this question has already been settled.

Comrades, we see how great the influence of anti-parliamentary tendencies still is in the old countries of parliamentarianism and democracy, for example France, England, and so on. In France I had the opportunity of personally observing, at the beginning of the war, that the first audacious voices against the war - at the very moment when the Germans stood at the gates of Paris - were raised in the ranks of a small group of French syndicalists. These were the voices of my friends - Monatte, Rosmer and others. At that time it was impossible for us to pose the question of forming the Communist Party: such elements were far too few. But I felt myself a comrade among comrades in the company of Comrades Monatte, Rosmer and others with an anarchistic past.

But what was there in common between me and a Renaudel who excellently understands the need of the party; or an Albert Thomas and other gentlemen whom I do not even want to call "comrades" so as not to violate the rules of decency?

Comrades, the French syndicalists are conducting revolutionary work within the syndicates. When I discuss today, for example, with Comrade Rosmer, we have a common ground. The French syndicalists, in defiance of the traditions of democracy and its deceptions, have said: "We do not want any parties, we stand for proletarian syndicates and for the revolutionary minority within them which applies direct action." What the French syndicalists understood by this minority was not clear even to themselves. It was a portent of the future development, which, despite their prejudices and illusions, has not hindered these same syndicalist comrades from playing a revolutionary role in France, and from producing that small minority which has come to our International Congress.

What does this minority mean to our friends? It is the chosen section of the French working class, a section with a clear program and organization of its own, an organization where they discuss all questions, and not alone discuss but also decide, and where they are bound by a certain discipline. However, proceeding from the experience of the proletarian struggle against the bourgeoisie, proceeding from its own experience and the experience of other countries, French syndicalism will be compelled to create the Communist Party.

Comrade Pestaña says: "I don't want to touch this question. I am a syndicalist and I don't want to talk politics, still less do I want to talk about the party." This is extremely interesting. He does not want to talk about the Communist Party so as not to insult the revolution. This means that the criticism of the Communist Party and of its necessity appears to him within the framework of the Russian Revolution as an insult to the revolution. That's how it is. It was the same in Hungary.

Comrade Pestaña, who is an influential Spanish syndicalist, came to visit us because there are among us comrades who to one degree or another take their stand on the soil of syndicalism; there are also among us comrades who are, so to speak, parliamentarians, and others who are neither parliamentarians nor syndicalists but who stand for mass action, and so on. But what do we offer him? We offer him an International Communist Party, that is, the unification of the advanced elements of the working class who come together with their experience, share it with the others, criticize one another, adopt decisions, and so on.

When Comrade Pestaña returns to Spain with these decisions his comrades will want to know: "What did you bring back from Moscow?" He will then present them with the theses and ask them to vote the resolution up or down; and those Spanish syndicalists, who unite on the basis of the proposed theses, will form nothing else but the Spanish Communist Party.

Trotsky: excerpt from Lessons of October (1924)

Without a party, apart from a party, over the head of a party, or with a substitute for a party, the proletarian revolution cannot conquer. That is the principal lesson of the past decade. It is true that the English trade unions may become a mighty lever of the proletarian revolution; they may, for instance, even take the place of workers' soviets under certain conditions and for a certain period of time. They can fill such a role, however, not apart from a Communist party, and certainly not against the party, but only on the condition that communist influence becomes the decisive influence in the trade unions. We have paid far too dearly for this conclusion - with regard to the role and importance of a party in a proletarian revolution - to renounce it so lightly or even to minimize its significance.

Consciousness, premeditation, and planning played a far smaller part in bourgeois revolutions than they are destined to play, and already do play, in proletarian revolutions. In the former instance the motive force of the revolution was also furnished by the masses, but the latter were much less organized and much less conscious than at the present time. The leadership remained in the hands of different sections of the bourgeoisie, and the latter had at its disposal wealth, education, and all the organizational advantages connected with them (the cities, the universities, the press, etc.). The bureaucratic monarchy defended itself in a hand-to-mouth manner, probing in the dark and then acting. The bourgeoisie would bide its time to seize a favorable moment when it could profit from the movement of the lower classes, throw its whole social weight into the scale, and so seize the state power. The proletarian revolution is precisely distinguished by the fact that the proletariat - in the person of its vanguard - acts in it not only as the main offensive force but also as the guiding force. The part played in bourgeois revolutions by the economic power of the bourgeoisie, by its education, by its municipalities and universities, is a part which can be filled in a proletarian revolution only by the party of the proletariat.

The role of the party has become all the more important in view of the fact that the enemy has also become far more conscious. The bourgeoisie, in the course of centuries of rule, has perfected a political schooling far superior to the schooling of the old bureaucratic monarchy. If parliamentarism served the proletariat to a certain extent as a training school for revolution,

then it also served the bourgeoisie to a far greater extent as the school of counterrevolutionary strategy. Suffice it to say that by means of parliamentarism the bourgeoisie was able so to train the social democracy that it is today the main prop of private property. The epoch of the social revolution in Europe, as has been shown by its very first steps, will be an epoch not only of strenuous and ruthless struggle but also of planned and calculated battles – far more planned than with us in 1917....

The party should and must know the whole of the past, so as to be able to estimate it correctly and assign each event to its proper place. The tradition of a revolutionary party is built not on evasions but on critical clarity.

History secured for our party revolutionary advantages that are truly inestimable. The traditions of the heroic struggle against the tsarist monarchy; the habituation to revolutionary self-sacrifice bound up with the conditions of underground activity; the broad theoretical study and assimilation of the revolutionary experience of humanity; the struggle against Menshevism, against the Narodniks, and against conciliationism; the supreme experience of the 1905 revolution; the theoretical study and assimilation of this experience during the years of counterrevolution; the examination of the problems of the international labor movement in the light of the revolutionary lessons of 1905 – these were the things which in their totality gave our party an exceptional revolutionary temper, supreme theoretical penetration, and unparalleled revolutionary sweep.

Nevertheless, even within this party, among its leaders, on the eve of decisive action there was formed a group of experienced revolutionists, Old Bolsheviks, who were in sharp opposition to the proletarian revolution and who, in the course of the most critical period of the revolution from February 1917 to approximately February 1918, adopted on all fundamental questions an essentially social democratic position. It required Lenin, and Lenin's exceptional influence in the party, unprecedented even at that time, to safeguard the party and the revolution against the supreme confusion following from such a situation. This must never be forgotten if we wish other Communist parties to learn anything from us...

Each party, even the most revolutionary party, must inevitably produce its own organizational conservatism; for otherwise it would lack the necessary stability. This is wholly a question of degree. In a revolutionary party the vitally necessary dose of conservatism must be combined with a complete freedom from routine, with initiative in orientation and daring in action. These qualities are put to the severest test during turning points in history. We have already quoted the words of Lenin to the effect that even the most revolutionary parties, when an abrupt change occurs in a situation and when new tasks arise as a consequence, frequently pursue the political line of yesterday and thereby become, or threaten to become, a brake upon the revolutionary process. Both conservatism and revolutionary initiative find their most concentrated expression in the leading organs of the party. In the meantime, the European Communist parties have still to face their sharpest "turning point" – the turn from preparatory work to the actual seizure of power. This turn is the most exacting, the most unpostponable, the most responsible, and the most formidable. To miss the moment for the turn is to incur the greatest defeat that a party can possibly suffer.

The experience of the European struggles, and above all the struggles in Germany, when looked at in the light of our own experience, tells us that there are two types of leaders who incline to drag the party back at the very moment when it must take a stupendous leap forward. Some among them generally tend to see mainly the difficulties and obstacles in the way of revolution, and to estimate each situation with a preconceived, though not always conscious, intention of avoiding any action. Marxism in their hands is turned into a method for establishing the impossibility of revolutionary action. The purest specimens of this type are the Russian Mensheviks. But this type as such is not confined to Menshevism, and at the most critical moment it suddenly manifests itself in responsible posts in the most revolutionary party.

The representatives of the second variety are distinguished by their superficial and agitational approach. They never see any obstacles or difficulties until they come into a head-on collision with them. The capacity for surmounting real obstacles by means of bombastic phrases, the tendency to evince lofty optimism on all questions ("the ocean is only knee deep"), is inevitably transformed into its polar opposite when the hour for decisive action strikes. To the first type of revolutionist, who makes mountains out of molehills, the problems of seizing power

lie in heaping up and multiplying to the nth degree all the difficulties he has become accustomed to see in his way. To the second type, the superficial optimist, the difficulties of revolutionary action always come as a surprise.

In the preparatory period the behavior of the two is different: the former is a skeptic upon whom one cannot rely too much, that is, in a revolutionary sense; the latter, on the contrary, may seem a fanatic revolutionist. But at the decisive moment, the two march hand in hand; they both oppose the insurrection. Meanwhile, the entire preparatory work is of value only to the extent that it renders the party and above all its leading organs capable of determining the moment for an insurrection, and of assuming the leadership of it.

Max Shachtman: from "Five Years of the Workers' Party", 1945

Perhaps our greatest gain is in the kind of party we have succeeded in building. In it, we have living proof that a Bolshevik party does not mean the totalitarian prison so many people have been led to believe it always was and must always be. The democratic character of our organisation is not merely our boast. Militants and radicals outside our party know the facts and acknowledge them. Our party is intolerant of any attempts to curb the intellectual freedom and critical independence of its membership. All it demands is rigid discipline in action and a high degree of responsibility in building up the party.

It is able to make and enforce this demand not only because its main policies have proved to be correct, but because there is no bureaucratic regime, "benevolent" or otherwise, in the party. Without ever descending to the futility of a "debating society," our party has repeatedly had the freest discussions of political and theoretical questions. Some have been confined to the party ranks, but the more important ones have also been discussed in public, in the pages of our New International. Some of them have been extremely ardent, even sharply polemical. Groups, ideological formations, of different kinds have existed in the party and continue to exist; in one form or another, on one question or another, they will probably always exist. But we have no resolutions calling for the "dissolution of factions," and if good Bolshevik practice continues to prevail, we shall never have such resolutions. We have established in our party such a relationship between leaders and members and of all members with each other, and between adopted program and criticism of it, that there is no air in the party for a bureaucratic or clique regime. And there, after all, lies the secret of the absence of permanent factions, as distinguished from ideological groupings. There are no such factions because there is no soil - a bureaucratic regime - for them to grow in.

It might be said that the kind of party we have built up is our richest possession. In itself, it does not guarantee against making political mistakes, including serious ones. But it makes possible a speedy correction of such mistakes if they are made, a correction without the convulsive crises to which bureaucratized parties are doomed whenever a serious difference of opinion forces its way past the lid.

From this standpoint, it might be added in passing, the big obstacle to the union of the two Trotskyist organisations in this country is not so much the political differences that exist. Although some of these differences are greater than they were five years ago, others have become less acute. In any event, people with even greater political differences could live and work side by side in a single party provided it were a normal party. It is no secret, for example, that in our own party close cooperation is possible between comrades who, on some questions, have greater differences between themselves than our party as a whole has, on other questions, with the SWP.

The principal obstacle (as this writer sees it) lies precisely in the sterile, bureaucratic regime which the Cannonites have imposed upon and continue to maintain in the SWP, a regime which the new minority in the SWP rightly describes as Stalinist in its trend. Unity is a precious thing. The kind of party that would result from unity is, however, far more important. Our comrades are not disposed for a minute to trade off what they have built up for any regime that smacks of Cannonism.

The last thirty years have been rich in events and in lessons for the working class, if not in

victories. If we were asked to tell what makes us believe that the final victory will go to socialism, we would answer: Capitalism has shown conclusively that it cannot advance society and civilization, but only drive it further along the road of exhausting conflict, human degradation, barbarism and ruin. It no longer has a capacity for stability, order, peace and progress. The working class, even those sections of it that have been most cruelly oppressed, has shown a power of recuperation from defeat and resources of resistance to capitalist decay that amply justify our confidence in its eventual triumph. It has proved repeatedly that the conditions for its existence and progress is the struggle against the conditions of its existence. That is how it has been and that is how it must be.

Although the connections between conscious socialism and the working class were broken once by the old social-democracy and again by Stalinism, they have not been destroyed. They exist in the form of our movement and its program, and they will be strengthened. The firmness of our party and the confirmation of its program by events justify the confidence we have in both. They justify also our confidence that the revolutionary International of the working class - a most important matter that cannot be dealt with briefly because it requires and deserves a chapter for itself - will be restored and solidified. What makes the struggle for socialism and freedom seem more difficult, also makes it more urgently necessary. It simply makes no sense to us when we are told that encroaching capitalist barbarism is destroying the prospects of socialism and it is better to give up the fight. That is the talk of demoralized and spiritually vanquished serfs. It is precisely the fact that decomposing capitalism is filling the air with its poisonous fumes, that imposes upon us the redoubling of our efforts to bury the putrid beast.

Let the cowards flinch and the traitors sneer. Our minds are incapable of absorbing the truly monstrous idea that humanity, which has shown so often an irresistible passion for liberty and an inexhaustible capacity for achieving it progressively, will, now, at the historic pinnacle of its intellectual and social development, finally yield to the yoke in permanence, like brute cattle. We reiterate our faith in the people, in the working class, and dedicate ourselves again, on this fifth anniversary, to the socialist emancipation.

James P Cannon: From Theses on the American Revolution, 1946

The decisive instrument of the proletarian revolution is the party of the class conscious vanguard. Failing the leadership of such a party, the most favourable revolutionary situations, which arise from the objective circumstances, cannot be carried through to the final victory of the proletariat and the beginnings of planned reorganisation of society on socialist foundations. This was demonstrated most conclusively—and positively—in the 1917 Russian Revolution. This same principled lesson derives no less irrefutably—even though negatively—from the entire world experience of the epoch of wars, revolutions, and colonial uprisings that began with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

However, this basic conclusion from the vast and tragic experience of the last third of a century can be and has been given a reactionary interpretation by a school of neo-revisionism, represented by the ideologues, philosophers, and preachers of prostration, capitulation, and defeat. They say in effect: "Since the revolutionary party is small and weak it is idle to speak of revolutionary possibilities. The weakness of the party changes everything." The authors of this "theory" reject and repudiate Marxism, embracing in its place the subjective school of sociology. They isolate the factor of the revolutionary party's relative numerical weakness at a particular moment from the totality of objective economic and political developments which creates all the necessary and sufficient conditions for the swift growth of the revolutionary vanguard party.

Given an objectively revolutionary situation, a proletarian party—even a small one—equipped with a precisely worked out Marxist program and firm cadres can expand its forces and come to the head of the revolutionary mass movement in a comparatively brief span of time. This too was proved conclusively—and positively—by the experiences of the Russian Revolution in 1917. There the Bolshevik Party, headed by Lenin and Trotsky, bounded forward from a tiny minority, just emerging from underground and isolation in February to the conquest of power in October—a period of nine months.

Numerical weakness, to be sure, is not a virtue for a revolutionary party but a weakness to be overcome by persistent work and resolute struggle. In the US all the conditions are in the process of unfolding for the rapid transformation of the organised vanguard from a propaganda group to a mass party strong enough to lead the revolutionary struggle for power.

The hopeless contradictions of American capitalism, inextricably tied up with the death agony of world capitalism, are bound to lead to a social crisis of such catastrophic proportions as will place the proletarian revolution on the order of the day.

In this crisis, it is realistic to expect that the American workers, who attained trade union consciousness and organisation within a single decade, will pass through another great transformation in their mentality, attaining political consciousness and organisation. If in the course of this dynamic development a mass labour party based on the trade unions is formed, it will not represent a detour into reformist stagnation and futility, as happened in England and elsewhere in the period of capitalist ascent. From all indications, it will rather represent a preliminary stage in the political radicalisation of the American workers, preparing them for the direct leadership of the revolutionary party.

The revolutionary vanguard party, destined to lead this tumultuous revolutionary movement in the US, does not have to be created. It already exists, and its name is the SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY. It is the sole legitimate heir and continuator of pioneer American Communism and the revolutionary movements of the American workers from which it sprang. Its nucleus has already taken shape in three decades of unremitting work and struggle against the stream. Its program has been hammered out in ideological battles and successfully defended against every kind of revisionist assault upon it. The fundamental core of a professional leadership has been assembled and trained in the irreconcilable spirit of the combat party of the revolution.

The task of the SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY consists simply in this: to remain true to its program and banner; to render it more precise with each new development and apply it correctly in the class struggle; and to expand and grow with the growth of the revolutionary mass movement, always aspiring to lead it to victory in the struggle for political power.

## What Is It that a Revolutionary Party Does?

By Sean Matgamna

The organisational nature of a Marxist "revolutionary party" has, obviously, to be shaped to what the Marxist party exists to do in the outside world. What, fundamentally, irreplaceably, does it do?

In the course of its life a Marxist party does many things, from organising strikes, to street-fighting with fascists and racists, to organising insurrections. But fundamentally, through all the phases and varieties of its activity, it works to educate and enlighten the working class so that it can see capitalist class society as a whole; the place of capitalism in history as one exploitative class society in a succession of them; the place of the working class in capitalist society; the possibility and urgent necessity for the working class to overthrow capitalism and begin to build a socialist society.

Plekhanov, the well-named "Father of Russian Marxism" and first teacher of Lenin, explained the idea of Marxist revolutionary activity which would guide the Bolsheviks in their work of preparing the working class to make the October Revolution in 1917:

"Standing resolutely on the side of the proletariat, the new Socialists do everything in their power to facilitate and hasten its victory. But what exactly can they do in this case?"

"A necessary condition for the victory of the proletariat is its recognition of its own position, its relations with its exploiters, its historic role and its sociopolitical tasks.

"For this reason the new Socialists consider it their principal, perhaps even their only, duty to promote the growth of this consciousness among the proletariat, which for short they call its class consciousness.

"The whole success of the socialist movement is measured for them in terms of the growth in the class consciousness of the proletariat. Everything that helps this growth they see as useful to their cause: everything that slows it down as harmful.

"Anything that has no effect one way or the other is of no consequence for them, it is politically uninteresting..."

The Communist Manifesto explained: "The Communists... have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole..."@The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole".

Living in the depths of Stalinist corruption, Trotsky summed up the rules that must govern a serious Marxist party in its internal life and in its relation to the working class: "To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right names; to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be; not to fear obstacles; to be true in little things as in big ones; to base one's program on the logic of the class struggle; to be bold when the hour for action arrives..."

To play this role in the working class the members of the Marxist organisation must educate themselves. This is not only a matter of mastering key old texts. It is an ongoing process. The Marxists don't just teach the working class, we learn from it also - as, for instance, the Bolsheviks learned about soviets and their possibilities from the Russian working class.

That requires that the Marxist party is a democratic organisation in which the members can think, question, reason and learn from past and contemporaneous events. Which is made up of thinking people, not aspirant parrots.

Where the leaders have the authority of more experienced, more knowledgeable, more devoted comrades, not the authority of sect priests. Where Marxism is an honest tool of analysis, not the house-broken handmaid rationalising whatever the "party" apparatus decides to say and do.

Trotsky, with the stiflingly bureaucratic parties of Stalinism in mind, once compared the need for democracy within a revolutionary Marxist organisation to the need of a living being for oxygen. Without oxygen the living being stifles and dies. Without democracy so, over a longer period of time, does a would-be Marxist party.

The question of the organisational rules for a Marxist party -"Democratic centralism"- has been hopelessly muddied over by the experience of Stalinism - and of some notionally Trotskyist organisations, Lenin described what it is in a 1906 article:

"Criticism within the limits of the principles of the Party Programme must be quite free, not only at Party meetings, but also at public meetings. Such criticism... cannot be prohibited. The Party's political action must be united. No calls that violate the unity of definite actions can be tolerated either at public meetings, or at Party members, or in the Party press".@What this meant is shown by the experience of the Bolshevik party in the October Revolution.

Two leading Bolsheviks, Zinoviev and Kamenev, publicly denounced the Party's plans for an insurrection. In the insurrection they placed themselves at the disposal of the party in the action decided upon by the majority of the party. The indignant Lenin later proposed that they should be expelled for strike-breaking, but on the leading Committee failed to win a single vote to add to his own.

An organisation in which the members do not have the right and the duty at all times to think about politics and the affairs of the organisation, and the right to express their opinions freely, is in reality the opposite of Bolshevism. For decades the SWP was organised more like the Catholic Church, with its own pope and College of Cardinals, than like Lenin's Bolsheviks!

Isn't such a way of organising ridiculous? It makes no sense. It has led to such nonsense as Respect and hobnobbing with the Muslim Brotherhood, which Tony Cliff once justly denounced as clerical fascists. It wasn't the Brotherhood that had changed in essence, but the leaders whom Cliff had educated to carry on his tradition.

The prolonged, reverberating crisis of the SWP places the need to reorganise the Marxist left into a democratic force at the centre of our political concerns. What are the preconditions for a healthy democratic organisation?

The first precondition is full rights of internal discussion. You get some discussion even in the most bureaucratic organisation, but usually as a concession from the leadership. But it needs to be a right of the members to have a discussion when they want it.

You have to have it written into the constitution, as it is written into AWL's constitution, that there is a right of access to the public press for minorities. @There may be exceptions - where you're going to organise an insurrection, you wouldn't allow a minority to denounce this plan in your paper - but everyday, normally, minorities should on demand get access to the press. @There must be a possibility of initiative in the organisation other than from the centre.

There are some Trotskyist organisations which have rules that say that discussion can't be started until the centre initiates it. But there has to be a right of initiative for every member.

You need a right for members to by-pass the leading committee and call a conference if necessary. Our AWL constitution gives the Disputes Committee the right to bypass the leading committees and call a conference if necessary. It wouldn't do that casually, but the right has to exist.

The organisation must have a politically self-respecting membership. @An organisation where members are taught to kowtow to a Pope, to an archbishop, to a prophet - that organisation is not breeding self-respecting individuals. It is not breeding educated political militants. It is not breeding militants who could lead a mass working-class struggle.

Imagine the SWP as it now is, and has been for a long time, leading a workers' revolution. It is not really imaginable. It wouldn't, couldn't, happen. But suspend disbelief and suppose that it did, then the SWP would disintegrate in response to the great swirling mass of activity. Or if it didn't disintegrate, and it took power, then how could it create anything other than a very deformed workers' state - if it was a workers' state at all - shaped by the structures of the SWP itself and by militants educated in the present-day functionings of that "Revolutionary Party".

You have to have self-respecting individuals with some idea of their own political value and of their rights.

You have to have an atmosphere in the organisation where discussion is free - where there is not a heavy disapproval from full-timers, central bodies, and so on, of discussion. Where there is no shouting down, no intellectual hooliganism. @You need an organisation where the "machine", the full-timers, have no privileges. They have rights - they have the rights of members - but there is no special prioritisation for the "machine".

The organisation has to be regulated above all by the rhythms and by the needs of the class struggle. It has to accept, and really mean, what the Communist Manifesto says - that the communists have no interests apart from those of the working class.

The organisation has to be a living part of the class struggle, not a spinning top on its own axis, as all sectarian groups are.

It has to be an honestly Marxist organisation. One of the baneful things on the left is that in most cases what the groups say is determined or heavily adulterated by calculations of advantage. That is best called "apparatus Marxism". It is a sort of twin of academic Marxism.

There should not be any pre-designated leaders. Quite plainly in any collection of people some will have more abilities in certain directions, but there should not be a pre-designated leadership. There should not be a closed leadership.

That is democratic centralism as the Bolsheviks had it, as Lenin had it, and as it can serve the working class. The sectarian stuff can't, and that is the reason for condemning it.

The fundamental trouble with the SWP's methods is that they cannot serve the working class or help the working class. They can only do harm.

## **Socialism in disarray, part 5**



By Sean Matgamna

### **Cultural inertia**

The precondition for the direct and indirect effect which Stalinism still has on the current would-be left is the fact that a culture, once established, has a tremendous power of inertia.

A culture can be extirpated, wiped out, adulterated, or turned inside out, as the previous socialist and Marxist political culture was by Stalinism; but it can also, left to "itself", go on for a very long time, especially if it still seems to "work" and nothing better replaces it.

The degenerated social-democratic culture in the working class is a case in point. It survived long after the political and moral collapse of social democracy in 1914, even where it had to compete with the vigorous early Communist International.

Antonio Gramsci: "Mass ideological factors always lag behind mass economic phenomena... at certain moments, the automatic thrust due to the economic factor is slowed down, obstructed or even momentarily broken by traditional ideological elements... Hence ... there must be a conscious, planned struggle to ensure that the exigencies of the economic position of the masses, which may conflict with the traditional leadership's policies, are understood. An appropriate political initiative is always necessary to liberate the economic thrust from the dead weight of traditional policies".

### **The revolutionary Marxist tradition**

Today we live in conditions where the tradition of revolutionary Marxism that "flowed" through Trotsky and the Trotskyism of his time is highly fragmented.

Its elements are disassembled and sometimes needlessly counterposed to each other as fetish-objects, that is, dogmatically overemphasised aspects of what should be one integrated movement. This situation has much in common with the state of revolutionary socialism before the Communist International, after the October Revolution, began to reintegrate the contributions of the Social-Democratic left, the revolutionary syndicalists, and the best of the anarchists, into a coherent whole.

Yet the revolutionary socialist tradition is immensely important.

The revolutionary movement is, in Trotsky's words, "the memory of the working class". The bourgeoisie has a vast retinue of intellectuals to record, construe, explain, slant, spin current and past events from the point of view of the ruling bourgeoisies. It has a many-faceted educational apparatus which teaches its history, its values, its outlook, which glorifies its system.

It tells the young that capitalism and bourgeois democracy are the culmination of history. It fights the bourgeois class war on the "ideological front", waging a never-ending ideological war on the bourgeoisie's behalf. (For instance, the way the oil and other "interests" have systematically worked to discredit the evidence about global warming.)

The bourgeoisie also has social and political institutions which "socialise" people in general and the working class in particular, into the values, the outlook, and the tradition which expresses its interests.

The working class has none of that. It exists in a bourgeois world, dominated by commerce, which inculcates bourgeois values. It is constantly under bombardment by the bourgeois media, which do the same.

Against all that we have our under-resourced educational and propaganda work; and a large part of that depends on and is enriched by the written residues of the socialist past - what we have of them.

You cannot at will take the working class through the enlightening experience of a general strike. You can teach workers about the general strikes of history, like Britain in 1926 and France in 1936 and 1968, and about such half-buried events as the British general strike of 1842 (in bourgeois histories, the "Plug Riots").

Our traditions embody our history, our collective, codified experience, spanning generations and the work of generations of socialists. They exemplify our Marxist methodology, our models of how to analyse and think.

In times of adversity, one-sided "sects" can sometimes play a positive role, by preserving valuable ideas, even in a decayed, desiccated, or petrified form.

The "orthodox Trotskyists" did that, and so in their different ways did the others. AWL, over decades, evolved its own political tradition out of the "orthodox Trotskyism" of James P Cannon. We then "discovered" the literary work in the 1940s and 50s of Max Shachtman and others.

We have learned much from the "heterodox Trotskyists" and from attempting to reintegrate the positive contributions of others - the De Leonites and revolutionary syndicalists, for example - into our work. Much of what we had been doing had been done earlier by the Shachtmanites, and done better because the Workers' Party and ISL emerged as part of a general Bolshevik-Trotskyist culture much richer and deeper than was the culture of the politically impoverished dialects and descendants of the earlier Trotskyist movement out of which the AWL tendency evolved.

We live in a situation where the living aspects of our tradition are dislocated, and embedded in partly, or sometimes greatly, alien traditions, for instance, that of the "orthodox Trotskyists", from which AWL has evolved. Therefore, in striving to integrate the sundered elements of the Trotskyism of Trotskyists we face the danger of vapid eclecticism. To a shaping extent, such political and theoretical eclecticism is central to the SWP-UK.

Avoiding that is a question of striving for consistency, critical understanding of what we take as our "tradition", and above all in living by the cardinal rule of Marxist politics - to be guided always by the logic of the class struggle, and within that by the interests of the working class, including its "interest" in learning what capitalism is and what socialism strives to be and to achieve.

### **What Marxist party is and does**

The working class, at high points of struggle, can and does improvise with great creativity, often forcing the Marxists to shake themselves up and re-think in order to "catch up".

But a lucid overview of the mechanisms of capitalism, of the nature and relations of the social classes, of the long historic evolution of which working-class socialism will be the culmination, and of socialist strategy, cannot be improvised.

Broad labour movements can arrive at generally socialist hopes and aspirations, just as young people can arrive at angry rebellion against capitalism. Scientific understanding of capitalism, of society, of the centrality of the working class and the politics of working class self-liberation - in short, understanding of how we can map the way from capitalism neo-barbarism to human liberation - does not arise "spontaneously".

It has to be brought into the struggle by those who have laboured for years or decades in advance to educate themselves and absorb the lessons of past struggles.

Quick, seemingly miraculous, transformations in the thinking of labour movements have occurred and will occur. Why? Because the worker who accepts capitalism is in a condition in which her and his objective interests as both worker and human being are at odds with the ideas about society and the world she or he has been taught to accept. In times of big struggles, those ideas come into direct conflict with the experience of the worker, and start to totter. Once that begins, everything can change.

Marxism is a necessary part of this process. But it has to be the authentic Marxism, the real Marxism, of its best period.

It is to make Marxist theory a living reality in working-class practice that socialist organisations do what they do.

### **Lenin on the formation of socialist labour movements**

Writing about Russia 100 years ago, Lenin put it like this:

"Social-Democracy [the revolutionary Marxist movement, in the terminology of Lenin's time of writing] is a combination of the labour movement with socialism. Its task is not passively to

serve the labour movement at each of its separate stages, but to represent the interests of the movement as a whole, to point out to this movement its ultimate aims and its political tasks, and to protect its political and ideological independence.

Isolated from Social-Democracy, the labour movement becomes petty and inevitably becomes bourgeois: in conducting only the economic struggle, the working class loses its political independence; it becomes the tail of other parties and runs counter to the great slogan: 'The emancipation of the workers must be the task of the workers themselves.'

In every country there has been a period in which the labour movement existed separately from the socialist movement, each going its own road; and in every country this state of isolation weakened both the socialist movement and the labour movement. Only the combination of socialism with the labour movement in each country created a durable basis for both the one and the other.

But in each country this combination of socialism with the labour movement took place historically, was brought about in a special way, in accordance with the conditions prevailing at the time in each country.. The process of combining the two movements is an extremely difficult one, and there is therefore nothing surprising in the fact that it is accompanied by vacillations and doubts."

And again: "The strikes of the 1890s [in Russia] revealed far greater flashes of consciousness: definite demands were put forward, the time to strike was carefully chosen, known cases and examples in other places were discussed, etc. While the earlier riots were simply uprisings of the oppressed, the systematic strikes represented the class struggle in embryo, but only in embryo.

Taken by themselves, these strikes were simply trade union struggles, but not yet Social-Democratic struggles. They testified to the awakening antagonisms between workers and employers, but the workers were not and could not be conscious of the irreconcilable antagonism of their interests to the whole of the modern political and social system, i.e., it was not yet Social-Democratic consciousness. In this sense, the strikes of the 1890s, in spite of the enormous progress they represented as compared with the 'riots', represented a purely spontaneous movement.

We said that there could not yet be Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. This consciousness could only be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own efforts, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., it may itself realise the necessity for combining in unions, for fighting against the employers and for striving to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc.

The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories that were elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals. According to their social status, the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia. Similarly, in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of Social-Democracy arose quite independently of the spontaneous growth of the labour movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of ideas among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia".

Today, Marxism, scientific socialism - what in Lenin's time was called Social Democracy - is everywhere separate from the labour movement, greatly more so than when Lenin was writing. To unite Marxism with the labour movement is the task of revolutionary socialists and consistent democrats everywhere. The collapse of Stalinism gives us a better chance of doing that than we have had in 75 years.

But Marxism itself - the consciousness of the unconscious processes of society - Marxism as a guide to revolutionary action, has suffered tremendous blows in the last historical period. The collapse of the Russian state-fostered pidgin Marxism clears the way for the development of unfalsified Marxism. We have a considerable way to go yet to achieve that.

### **Renewing Marxism**

The revolutionary Marxist tradition is "given", but Marxism is not. Marxism as a living force in socialist organisations and in the labour movement is not something given - it has to be fought for and won and then again fought for and won over again, and then yet again.

It has to be clarified and refined and augmented, again and again in a never-ending process. That process is, in a word, "the class struggle on the ideological front".

Lenin said it plainly and truly: "Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement." He also said: "Practice without theory is blind: theory without practice is sterile". In a declaration of the Editorial Board of the revolutionary newspaper *Iskra*, Lenin wrote:

"The intellectual unity of Russian Social-Democrats has still be to established, and in order to achieve this it is necessary, in our opinion, to have an open and thorough discussion of the fundamental principles and tactical questions... Before we can unite, and in order that we may unite, we must first of all firmly and definitely draw the lines of demarcation. Otherwise, our unity will be merely a fictitious unity, which will conceal the prevailing confusion and prevent its complete elimination.

Naturally, therefore, we do not intend to utilise our publication merely as a storehouse for various views. On the contrary, we shall conduct it along the lines of a strictly defined tendency. This tendency can be expressed by the word Marxism, and there is hardly need to add that we stand for the consistent development of the ideas of Marx and Engels, and utterly reject the half-way, vague and opportunistic emendations which have now become so fashionable..."

Having rejected eclecticism and indifferentism, he went on:

"But while discussing all questions from our own definite point of view, we shall not rule out of our columns polemics between comrades. Open polemics within the sight and hearing of all Russian Social-Democrats and class conscious workers are necessary and desirable, in order to explain the profound differences that exist, to obtain a comprehensive discussion of disputed questions, and to combat the extremes into which the representatives, not only of various views, but also of various localities or various 'crafts' in the revolutionary movement inevitably fall.

As has already been stated, we also consider one of the drawbacks of the present-day movement to be the absence of open polemics among those holding avowedly differing views, an effort to conceal the differences that exist over extremely serious questions."

These words offer a guide to revolutionary Marxists now. They guide the conduct of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty.

### **Marxism now**

The fight for Marxism and for a Marxist labour movement is the fight to prepare the only force capable of taking humanity out of our age of social neo-barbarism, the working class, for that task. It is for that task that the Alliance for Workers' Liberty exists and fights.

In the decades before World War Two, Trotsky organised the tiny forces that could be organised to compete, with desperate urgency, for the leadership of the working class against the perfidious incumbent leaderships of social democracy and Stalinism. But Trotsky and everything he represented was defeated and - as we have to recognise in retrospect - defeated for a whole historical period. Capitalism renewed itself on the mass graves, on the destroyed means of production and the ruined cities of the Second World War, and began a long period of expansion. Stalinism survived, expanded and then slowly asphyxiated in its own bureaucratic caul, for half a century, until, in Europe, it collapsed.

It is impossible to tell how long it will take the working class to make itself ready to suppress capitalist neo-barbarism and take humankind forward. It is more easily definable in terms of things that must be accomplished.

The labour movements again need to learn by way of their own experience and by the enlightening work of socialists:

- That capitalism is neither natural nor eternal. The economic crisis makes explaining this easier now than for decades.
- That it is a historically finite system whose inner processes - the creation and recreation of a proletariat and the relentless socialisation of the means of production, of which "globalisation" is the latest manifestation - prepare its own end.
- That capitalism digs its own grave.

- That the working class, which finds no class in society "lower" than itself and which can only organise the economy collectively, that is, democratically, is the representative within capitalism of the post-capitalist future, and the only force that can suppress this neo-barbarism and replace it with something better.

### **What is propaganda? What is agitation?**

In part one of this series, I quoted part of an answer to the question "What is the socialist movement?" given by George Plekhanov, the "father of Russian Marxism".

In other words: what is the revolutionary socialist party, and what does it do? Let us remind ourselves of, and quote more from, his answer, an answer which guided all the Russian revolutionary socialists, including the Bolsheviks. (In *What Is To Be Done?*, for example, Lenin based himself on Plekhanov's ideas on the relationship of propaganda and agitation).

"Shortly before the revolutionary year of 1848 there emerged among the Socialists men who looked at socialism in a completely new perspective... What... the Socialists with the new outlook [saw was] above all class struggle, the struggle of the exploited with the exploiters, the proletariat with the bourgeoisie.

In addition they saw in it the inevitability of the impending triumph of the proletariat, the fall of the present bourgeois social order, the socialist organisation of production and the corresponding alteration in the relationships between people, i.e. even the destruction of classes, among other things...

All their practical tasks are prompted by [the] class struggle... of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie...

Standing resolutely on the side of the proletariat, the new Socialists do everything in their power to facilitate and hasten its victory. But what exactly can they do?

A necessary condition for the victory of the proletariat is its recognition of its own position, its relations with its exploiters, its historic role and its socio-political tasks.

For this reason the new Socialists consider it their principal, perhaps even their only, duty to promote the growth of this consciousness among the proletariat, which for short they call its class consciousness.

The whole success of the socialist movement is measured for them in terms of the growth in the class consciousness of the proletariat. Everything that helps this growth they see as useful to their cause: everything that slows it down as harmful...

You will only be recognised as a Socialist if your activity has directly facilitated the growth of the class consciousness of the proletariat. If it does not exert this direct influence then you are not a Socialist at all...

My view... is expressed in its entirety in the epigram: Without workers who are conscious of their class interests there can be no socialism

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... 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".

### **How socialists are made**

Side by side with the broad, elemental class struggle of the working class - and with some

autonomy from it, not necessarily on the same rhythms and tempos - a certain proportion of each generation growing up under capitalism become convinced that they must fight to replace this society of exploitation and competition by socialism, a society of class and human solidarity. And some of them become committed activists.

For working-class struggles to move towards revolutionary conclusions, what is needed is that those activists organise themselves; educate themselves; keep their theory and their revolutionary drive bright and sharp; and integrate themselves into the existing labour movement and win respect and support there, so that at critical moments of working-class battles they can directly challenge the old time-serving leaders and prevent the diversion of the "spontaneous socialist" impulses of the workers in struggle.

That way the activists can win wider influence, recruit and educate new activists, refresh their own ideas by learning from the battles, and ultimately enlarge, improve, and sharpen their organisation so that at one of the inevitable points where large working-class struggle coincides with drastic internal crisis for capitalism they can lead the working class to revolutionary victory. That is what the Russian Marxists did between the 1880s and 1917.

### **The Russian revolutionary movement**

In Russia the first revolutionary socialists - most of whom also considered themselves "Marxists" - were the populists, peasant-agrarian socialists, who hoped to avoid full-scale development of capitalism in Russia.

The development of the Russian Marxist movement involved a small section of activists separating themselves off from a populist movement which, though in crisis, was still large, active, and influential, in order to argue in theoretical pamphlets for a new approach.

That approach was summed up by Plekhanov in the idea that the Marxists were "convinced that not the workers are necessary for the revolution, but the revolution for the workers"

Later the Marxists became a mass movement in 1905, only to split definitively and be reduced to very small numbers of reliable activists in the years of reaction which followed. As Lenin put it, "Russia achieved Marxism... through the agony she experienced in half a century of unparalleled torment and sacrifice, of unparalleled revolutionary heroism, incredible energy, devoted searching, study, practical trial, disappointment, verification, and comparison with European experience".

### **Difficulties of the working class as a revolutionary class**

The need for a revolutionary party arises from the fundamental nature of the working class as a revolutionary class.

The working class remains a class of wage slaves until, by seizing political power and the means of production, it makes the decisive step towards emancipating itself. Contrast the classic bourgeois experience.

The bourgeoisie develops historically within feudalism, neo-feudalism, and absolutism as part of a division of labour within society which allows the bourgeoisie to own a segment of the means of production, and itself to be an exploiter, long before it takes political power in society. It thus builds up wealth, culture, systems of ideas to express its interests and view of the world. It, so to speak, ripens organically, and the taking of power, the sloughing off of the old system - even though accompanied by violence - represents the natural maturing and growth of a class already in possession of important means of production, and of the new system it represents.

The working class remains an exploited class - in more developed capitalist countries, the basic exploited class - up to the death knell of bourgeois social and political rule. It does not accumulate leisure and wealth. Its natural condition as a raw social category is to be dominated by the ideas of the ruling class. Its own natural and spontaneous self-defence and bargaining within the capitalist system - trade unionism - binds it ideologically to the ruling class, to bargaining within the system and in times of crisis taking responsibility for it. Its natural tribunes and intellectuals are the trade union bureaucrats, who adopt middle-class lives and standards and thus grow away from - and often into antagonism to - the working class whose interests within capitalism they are charged to represent.

On the face of it the proletariat might be doomed to go through history as a subordinate class. Marx and Engels themselves wrote: "The ruling ideology in every society is the ideology of the

ruling class."

In fact the working class becomes a revolutionary class, conscious of its own historic class interests and possibilities in the following way, according to the views of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Gramsci, and all the great Marxists. A set of social theories is created and developed on the basis of bourgeois social science (economics, philosophy, history) which uncovers the necessary logic of the historic evolution of capitalism towards the completion of its organic tendency to become more and more social and monopolistic - by way of common ownership and the abolition of capital and wage-labour. The proletariat is identified as the progressive protagonist in this stage of history.

A segment of the intellectuals of the bourgeoisie comes over to the proletarian wage slaves.

The proletariat itself evolves as a class through the stage of primitive elemental revolt at being driven into the capitalist industrial hell-holes to the stage of organising itself in combinations to get fair wages, and then to the stage of banding itself together for political objectives. It develops various political traditions.

In Britain the world's first mass working class movement grouped around the demand for the franchise, which meant, in the conditions then, the right to take power. In France a tradition of communist insurrection, involving sections of the proletariat, developed. It was rooted in the left wing of the great bourgeois revolution. A tradition, experience and theory of working class politics developed.

Instead of control of a portion of the means of production, the working class develops its own organisations. Within these organisations a struggle takes place between the ideas that represent the historic interests of the proletariat - Marxism - and the ideas of the bourgeoisie. This struggle occurs even where Marxists are the founders of the labour movement.

### **Three fronts of the class struggle**

Antonio Gramsci summed up the threefold nature of the class struggle

"We know that the proletariat's struggle against capitalism is waged on three fronts: the economic, the political and the ideological. The economic struggle has three phases: resistance to capitalism, i.e. the elementary trade-union phase; the offensive against capitalism for workers' control of production; and the struggle to eliminate capitalism through socialisation.

The political struggle too has three principal phases: the struggle to check the bourgeoisie's power in the parliamentary State, in other words to maintain or create a democratic situation, of equilibrium between the classes, which allows the proletariat to organise; the struggle to win power and create the workers' State, in other words a complex political activity through which the proletariat mobilises around it all the anti-capitalist social forces (first and foremost the peasant class) and leads them to victory; and the phase of dictatorship of the proletariat, organised as a ruling class to eliminate all the technical and social obstacles which prevent the realisation of communism.

The economic struggle cannot be separated from the political struggle, nor can either of them be separated from the ideological struggle.

In its first, trade-union phase, the economic struggle is spontaneous; in other words, it is born inevitably of the very situation in which the proletariat finds itself under the bourgeois order. But in itself, it is not revolutionary; in other words, it does not necessarily lead to the overthrow of capitalism...

For the trade-union struggle to become a revolutionary factor, it is necessary for the proletariat to accompany it with political struggle: in other words, for the proletariat to be conscious of being the protagonist of a general struggle which touches all the most vital questions of social organisation; i.e. for it to be conscious that it is struggling for socialism...

The element of consciousness is needed, the 'ideological' element: in other words, an understanding of the conditions of the struggle, the social relations in which the worker lives, the fundamental tendencies at work in the system of those relations, and the process of development which society undergoes as a result of the existence within it of insoluble antagonisms, etc.

The three fronts of proletarian struggle are reduced to a single one for the party of the working

class, which is this precisely because it resumes and represents all the demands of the general struggle.

One certainly cannot ask every worker from the masses to be completely aware of the whole complex function which his class is destined to perform in the process of development of humanity. But this must be asked of members of the party.

One cannot aim, before the conquest of the State, to change completely the consciousness of the entire working class... But the party can and must, as a whole, represent this higher consciousness."

### **The post-Stalinist "fetish-party"**

The revolutionary party has as its central task to achieve the political and organisational independence of the working class, i.e. to help the working class learn to see capitalism and itself as they are.

It needs the organisational sinews of a body of socialists organised for combat all the way from the struggle on a trade union level at the point of production through to organising an armed insurrection. But it is centrally, irreplaceably, and uniquely, the carrier of a system of ideas, a world outlook, a socialist programme, a method of analysing the world and society which serves the interests of the working class.

Its core activity and responsibility in history is as an educator of the working class, enlightening workers about the nature of capitalist society and about what the working class can and must do in history.

The Stalinist "party of a new type" had an entirely different and antagonistic function, and a substitutionist relationship to the working class. The tragedy of the Trotskyist movement has been its adoption of a Stalinist model of a machine party. Such a party cannot serve our goal of working-class liberation.

The cry "build the revolutionary party" is too often, among would-be revolutionary socialists, an expression of an unthought-through yearning for revolutionary socialist competence and adequacy; and too often it encapsulates a false idea of a "revolutionary party" as essentially a "machine", an apparatus. That conception of a revolutionary party has been dominant in Britain for half a century now.

But revolutionary adequacy in any specific situation will include many factors beside the work of a political machine, many of them not to be created at will by the revolutionaries and dependent on the objective conditions of capitalist society and of the proletariat at a given time.

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.

### **The priorities of the party**

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.

If it is to be a party which is a living organ in the class struggle, then it must try to integrate itself in all the areas of the class struggle and in the actually-existing labour movement. If it is to be a party whose deliberations correspond to experience in the struggles of the working class, then it has to be a party of activists - of people with a minimum of commitment to the struggle. That commitment, under the direct control of the party, must be a condition of participation in the party's deliberations - that is, of full membership.

It has to be a party of the proletariat, but it is not identical to the proletariat: it must be capable of standing against the proletariat and of struggling within it when the mass of the working class is under the influence or domination of the ruling class or of pernicious pseudo-radical doctrines, be they Stalinist, Peronist, Christian or Islamic clerical-fascist, or any of the many variants of reactionary anti-imperialism. Its proletarian political character depends in the first place on its programme and its historical relation to the proletariat. A proletarian character in the crude sociological sense is not sufficient and in some epochs may not be possible.

The proletarian party without a mass working class membership organised at the point of production and deploying the power which the working class potentially has at the point of production, is impotent; proletarian militancy at the point of production devoid of the historical programme of working class socialism and perspectives for achieving it, is sterile and ultimately impotent.

For the keystone Marxist idea that the emancipation of the working-class is the work of the working-class itself - which in the history of socialism was a proclamation against utopian sects and saviours, individual or collective - the would-be left substitutes indifference to the working-class (for instance the old local government Left around people like Ken Livingstone) or reduces the working-class to a cipher, a token, a fetish of the sect.

The Stalinist fetish of the revolutionary "party of a new type" was a by-product of the utopian project of building socialism in Russia, China, etc. A recognisable descendant of that idea of a party continues in the ranks of the Trotskisant left today. Both the SWP-UK and the Socialist Party (Militant) are terrible examples of party fetishism.

In 1984 the SP/ Militant found itself in the leadership of the Liverpool labour movement in conflict with the Tory government, during the great miners' strike. It made a short-term deal with the Tories, which bought the council a year's time. It left the miners in the lurch - and guaranteed its own defeat when, with the miners beaten, the Tories and the Labour Party leaders came for Liverpool council, as they did.

Why did SP/Militant do that? They wanted to preserve their own "apparatus", their "party", and - very foolishly - thought that was the way to do it.

Likewise, as the Tories, intent on crushing the working class, came to power in 1979, the SWP adopted the thesis that nothing could be done in the period ahead except build "the socialists" , i.e. the SWP (the "theory of the downturn").

Both these groups continued the Stalinist conception of the "party of a new type" - only rendered more absurd - and senselessly counterposed it, when they thought that would serve their interests, to the working class.

### **The bomb and the book**

A hundred and twenty years ago, in the Russian Empire, as far as the Tsarist authorities were concerned the most fearsome revolutionaries were the Narodnik terrorists. They killed a Tsar in 1881. Lenin's brother Alexander, who took part in a plot to kill a Tsar, was hanged in 1887.

By comparison, the Marxists, with their doctrinal disputes, seemed relatively harmless. Some Marxist scientific literature was legally tolerated. Yet, Trotsky would write with perfect truth after the October revolution, it was not those who set out with guns and bombs in their hands who overthrew the Tsar, but those who set out with Marx's Capital under their arms.

Of the Ulyanov brothers, it was not the heroic martyr Alexander but the book-worming Vladimir Ilyich (Lenin) who posed the fundamental threat to the system. Marxism offered an alternative world outlook to that of the bourgeoisie and the landlords and those throughout society who supported them. It provided a theory of society and a method of extending and deepening that theory; it offered the perspective of a different type of society growing up within the capitalist class society, but dependent for its realisation on the revolutionary activity of the capitalist wage-slave class, the proletariat. The Marxist socialist movement was the memory of the proletariat.

The "fusion of science [Marxism] and the proletariat" created mass working class movements that did, indeed, seem capable of carving out the future they proclaimed. The battle for Marxism against bourgeois and petty-bourgeois outlooks within the labour movement was understood to be itself a front of the class struggle - the "ideological front".

After the collapse of the Second International in 1914, Lenin and others felt obliged to dig down to the roots of the Marxism that had dominated the International, and worked to define the flaws, mistakes and corruptions of doctrine that had led to the International's collapse. Of the results of this work Lenin's State and Revolution is perhaps the best known.

The Marxist "movement of the book" had to clean, shuffle, re-read and supplement its books. In Russia "science and the proletariat" had been fused as nowhere else - a raw, militant proletariat able to innovate new weapons like the mass strike and a Marxist movement forced to keep its intellectual weapons sharp and clear: "Marxism", which saw capitalism as progressive in history, had been adapted by layers of the Russian bourgeoisie opposed to the backward Tsarist system. The proletarian Marxists had to define and redefine themselves, the nature of the Russian revolution they worked for and their own role in that revolution. "Theory" was central.

Yet, though Lenin and Trotsky, Luxemburg, Plekhanov and Martov believed that there could be no revolutionary movement without a revolutionary theory, they made no fetish of "theory".

What distinguished Lenin's group from all the others was its capacity to pierce through the limits of its own theory and learn from the living working class, adjusting theory accordingly. There was a living fructifying interaction between theory and practice.

Thus, though Lenin and his comrades, like all the Marxists before 1905, believed that Russia needed and could not have other than a bourgeois revolution, they came in practice to differ from the others. Using theory as blindfold rather than microscope, the Mensheviks were content to stay on the level of generalities and to draw conclusions not from life, but from theoretical generalisations. A bourgeois revolution? Then obviously it will be led by the bourgeoisie.

A bourgeois revolution? Yes, said Lenin, in chorus with the others. But, he continued, no longer in chorus, what kind of bourgeois revolution? He insisted on examining the real Russian bourgeoisie as it was in life, irrespective of what theory said. He concluded that the Russian bourgeoisie could not lead a revolution and postulated that the workers and peasants would have to make the bourgeois revolution, against the bourgeoisie.

Focussing on the social realities, he thus concretised and deepened theory and laid the grounds for a revolutionary transformation of Marxist theory in the course of the revolution of 1917. The idea of fetishising "theory" in such a way that it blinkered perception and stifled concrete analysis and thought was utterly alien to Lenin. So was the idea that one could blame "bad theory" if, out of deference to "theory", one failed to keep concrete social, political and economic reality under constant review, testing and honing, and, where necessary, supplementing the theory in the process.

### **The "Never On A Sunday" left**

The SWP's attitude to Islam is possible only because they themselves have a quasi-religious outlook which they mistakenly think is Marxist and "dialectical".

They live in a hazy mental world where everything is essentially in flux; where "Revolution" is imminent; where things are therefore never just what they are; where everything solid dissolves into air. Political Islam is only a transient form of something else, the unfolding "Revolution". Islamic reaction does not matter because the socialist world revolution will soon clear everything up. It is not "really" reactionary because "objectively" it is part of something progressive, namely "revolutionary" opposition to "US and British imperialism". It is not a threat to anyone because it cannot last long.

"After Hitler, our turn", was how the complaisant Communist Party of Germany expressed a similar outlook over 70 years ago. "After the Islamists, our turn"?

History is a revolutionary roller-coaster. Realities dissolve into a pseudo-dialectical flurry.

All sorts of accommodations are licensed, because the thing accommodated to is not fully real. Thus their "revolutionary" socialist politics dissolve into a pseudo-historical mysticism which is very much like a religious belief in a godlike spirit of History which will "take care" of everything for us.

But in fact Islam is real - an immensely oppressive reality for many people in Muslim societies and communities, and especially for those of them who disagree to one degree or another. It is worth recalling that most of the left supported, for its "anti-imperialism", the comprehensively reactionary Islamic regime installed in Iran by the priest-led revolution - it was a revolution, and a profound one - of 1979. The priests are still in power 23 years later.

In *Never on a Sunday*, a once-famous movie made by an American refugee from McCarthyism, Jules Dassin, the heroine is Ilia, an earthy, primitive, whimsical, ignorant, wonderful creature, who makes a living fucking sailors in the Athens port of Piraeus. She loves the ancient Greek tragedies. The hero of the film sits with her in the amphitheatre as Medea, the wronged wife, slaughters her own children for revenge against their father, Jason. Ilia laughs her head off at the tragic events unfolding before her.

Why is she laughing, he asks? She knows it isn't real. It isn't really happening, she tells him. The children aren't really dead. When the play is over they will "all go to the seaside".

Such a way of looking at contemporary history, with an uncomprehending numb indifference rooted in the belief that horrors are not real horrors, is to rational socialism what the religious belief that nothing matters because everything will be made right in the afterlife is to a this-world, humanity-centred philosophy of life. It was at the heart of much 20th century socialist experience, for example of the attitude which people who should have known better took to Stalinism, and not only to Stalinism.

For Marxist socialists in Britain who have to combine defence of Muslim people from racists and scapegoaters with implacable hostility to Islam, the old Catholic tag offers guidance: love the sinner, hate the sin!

Defend Muslim people, fight Islam! Understand that political Islam is the enemy of everything that socialists stand for! Don't try to relate to the "Muslim community", but to the Muslim working class and to the "Muslim" secularists. Work to split the "Muslim community"; help organise the ex-Muslims, the insurgent women and the socialists within the "Muslim community"!

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.