

# Marxism and organization

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It is always worth examining the question of Marxism and organization because, if we would like to be organized Marxists who effectively struggle for socialism, we have a responsibility to know what we are about – and such knowledge is deepened by ongoing examination. There are scholarly reasons for going over such ground, but for activists the primary purpose is to improve our ability to help change the world. There are three basic ideas to be elaborated on here: 1) there must be a coming-together of socialism and the working class if either is to have a positive future; 2) those of us who think like that need to work together hard and effectively – which means we need to be part of a serious organization; and 3) socialist organizations must be a democratic/disciplined force in actual workers' struggles – that is the path to socialism. In what follows I will elaborate on this.

When speaking of Marxism, I don't just mean the ideas of Karl Marx – I am referring to a very rich political tradition that encompasses an impressive array of people and experiences. For example, I will be making reference here to Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky and others whom I believe were in many ways close to the perspectives of Marx. This is related to the understanding that we must not bow down to timeless dogmas but rather must be guided by a living body of thought and experience. It has multiple facets, and it evolves through interaction with changing global realities, with variations that are influenced by the specifics of distinctive national and cultural contexts.

The kind of world we want to see is a socialist world. The way we understand the word socialism is grounded in the way that Marx discussed it. It does not mean the government taking care of us, or the government running the economy. Unlike the notion of anti-socialists of the "Tea Party" variety (and other varieties), it does not mean more government control over our lives. Socialism means the ownership of the economy by the entire society, the democratic control of the economy by all of us, and the utilization of our economic resources to meet the needs of all people – enabling all people to live full and fulfilling lives characterized by freedom, community, and creative labor. If democracy means "rule by the people" (as it does), socialism is an economic democracy.

If that's what socialism is, then what is a socialist organization? What is the purpose of a socialist organization? Why does a group like the International Socialist Organization – for example – exist?

## Not Getting It Wrong

One way of looking at it is to think of it as a club, like an organization for those who have a special interest or hobby. If you are interested in history, you might join a history club. If you are into stamp collecting, you might join a stamp collecting club. If you have an incredibly high IQ, you might join Mensa in order to be able to get together with really smart people like yourself. One could see a socialist organization as a sort of affinity group for those who like socialism.

If that is how you see it, I hope you won't be offended when I say that I believe this is a stupid reason for organizing a socialist group. Because if you would really like to see socialism come into existence, you won't be able to make that happen in such a group.

A key to getting at the answer to the question is to realize that Karl Marx and his co-thinker Frederick Engels – politically active in Germany, France, Belgium, Britain and elsewhere – developed their thinking, what they called “scientific socialism,” through a serious and ongoing interaction with working-class activists.

This scientific socialism – which after Marx's death came to be called “Marxism” – is a complex and multi-faceted body of thought with multiple sources. It was grounded in the ideas of the Enlightenment and also of heroic Romanticism, drawing from German philosophy, French revolutionary thought, and British political economy, powerfully influenced as well by the capitalist Industrial Revolution and the rise of the working class, and by the struggles of the working class.

It involves five basic components. One of these is a dynamic philosophical orientation, or methodology, which is dialectical, materialist, and humanistic. Another of these involves a theory of history – which sees economic development and class struggle as shaping the way history unfolds. A third component involves an analysis of capitalism – how it is structured, how it works, how it exploits a growing number of people (the working class), how it opens up new possibilities but also is incredibly irrational and destructive when it comes to human needs. A fourth component of Marxism is based on the notion that the working-class majority has the power to replace capitalism with socialism, so here Marxism provides a basic political program for the working class. And the fifth component – which we have already touched on – involves the vision of a socialist future.

What is essential to Marxism is the key notion that there must be a fusion of socialism with the working class if they are each to have a positive future.

The working class, the way Marx and Engels defined it, is composed of those who make a living by selling their ability to work (which consists of energy for manual labor, intellectual labor, or both). It is those whose labor creates the goods and services all of us depend on. It also includes family members and others dependent on the paychecks of those who sell their ability to work – and also unemployed and retired workers. It is the creative majority, whose labor creates and sustains the economy on which society depends, those without whom capitalism could not function. Marxists see this as a force that potentially has the interest and the power to challenge capitalism. If they join together, the workers have the power to bring to birth a new and better world.

This provides the basis for defining the purpose of a socialist organization – but there is still room to get it wrong. If we simply see ourselves as a bigger, better affinity group whose purpose is to share our wisdom with the workers and recruit them into our ranks, we may be in for a big disappointment.

Some of us may have had the kind of experience of being part of a socialist group that appeals “from outside” to a romanticized abstraction, the Heroic Working Class, urging people to listen to our

socialist ideas, buy our socialist literature, come to our socialist meetings, and join with us in thinking revolutionary thoughts. This can be a way to attract some handfuls of thoughtful people. It is actually because of such activities that some of us may have become socialists and have become members of a socialist organization. But some of us have also had enough experience to know that this doesn't work as a means for mobilizing a working class majority in the effort to replace capitalism with socialism.

There has been a temptation for some anti-capitalists to conclude that it is not possible to mobilize a working-class majority, and that – few as we are – we should simply take matters into our own hands, substituting ourselves for the “revolutionary proletarian masses” who stubbornly refuse to materialize. Perhaps if we take drastic action, we can shake up and radicalize a working-class majority – or at least we can become militant avengers of the oppressed.

## **Getting It Right**

But Marx himself didn't see things this way. He was convinced that only the working class itself could free itself from capitalist exploitation and oppression. Only the working class, as a class, has the power to do that. Also, it happens to be the case that genuine freedom – defined as self-determination (taking control of your own life) can only be gained by each of us, and that genuine democracy – defined as rule by the people – can only come about, when people take power into their own hands. Marx believed that only the struggles of the working class could move reality in the direction of such freedom and democracy, providing the basis for socialism.

This is why an essential part of Marxism, put forward in the *Communist Manifesto* and elsewhere, involves a political program for the working class – that is, an outline of what to do to push back capitalist oppression and to achieve a socialist future. Marx based this program, to a significant degree, on the kinds of struggles he saw working-class activists engaging in.

If you read the *Communist Manifesto* carefully, and also Marx's 1864 *Inaugural Address to the International Workingmen's Association*, you will find classical statements of this program for the working class. The program consists of different parts. One involves building organizations of workers at their workplaces – these are known as trade unions – in order to struggle for and compel capitalist employers to pay higher wages, provide better (healthier, safer) working conditions, to agree to a shorter workday (ten hours instead of twelve, eight instead of ten, and so on), and to allow for more dignity on the job. In addition to building trade unions, the *Manifesto* encourages workers to push for reforms (which means improving life in the here and now, before a revolution takes place), which could be fought for by social movements for a shorter workday, for giving all people the right to vote, for women's rights, for an end to child labor, for public schools, for an end to racism, in opposition to war policies, and so on.

In addition to building such trade unions and social movements, Marx advocated the creation of an independent labor party of the working class to struggle for reforms and ultimately to win political power for the working class majority. Marx and Engels called this “winning the battle of democracy,” establishing working-class rule politically in order to expand it economically, with a revolutionary transition to socialism. That's the program.

It is important for revolutionaries to know what time it is. Not every aspect of the strategic program can be implemented regardless of specific conditions. It will take an accumulation of experiences and the spread and deepening of working-class consciousness for the working class to build its own political party and struggle to take power.

## **Social Democracy and the Rise of Communism**

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the development of industrial capitalism throughout Europe, militancy and solidarity grew within the growing working class, resulting in mass labor movements and large socialist workers' parties influenced by the ideas of Marx. The outstanding example was the German Social-Democratic Party, which attracted millions to the socialist cause. Its activists did admirable work – from which we have much to learn today – in building a massive socialist movement that involved not only an effective electoral party but also a powerful trade union movement, organizations and struggles for women's rights, organizations for young socialists, a rich and well-read party press, and multi-faceted cultural groups and activities (embracing art, literature, theatre, music, sports, hiking, camping and more). It came to be seen as a model for socialists influenced by Marx, inspiring other labor and social-democratic parties that arose in many lands during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In part because it grew by leaps and bounds, many came to believe that socialism's ultimate victory was inevitable. Within the leadership of the trade union and organizational apparatus, there were even elements which argued – given this presumably “inevitable” victory – that Marx's revolutionary outlook should be abandoned, that the socialist movement could just keep on piling up reforms to painlessly and gradually eliminate the negative features of capitalism. Among the outstanding leaders of the German Social Democratic Party were the working-class organizer August Bebel and the Marxist theoretician Karl Kautsky, both of whom made vital contributions in building up their party and the international socialist movement. Both insisted that Marx's revolutionary perspectives were not out of date. Unfortunately, in the years leading up to his death in 1913, Bebel increasingly felt it necessary to accommodate to the reformist and bureaucratic elements in the German workers' movement, and by 1910 Kautsky was doing the same. This would ill-prepare the German socialists for the period of war, political upheaval, revolutionary opportunity, economic depression, and fascist assaults that were going to materialize in coming decades.

Rosa Luxemburg became one of the most effective leaders in the revolutionary wing of the German Social Democracy and the international socialist movement. She was one of the most brilliant analysts and theoreticians in the movement – approaching Marxism in a creative and critical-minded way in order to make sense of new realities and upcoming challenges.

Luxemburg sharply challenged the reformist turn away from revolutionary strategy – insisting that Marx was right in seeing the interplay of reform and revolution as the best way to develop the consciousness and political experience of more and more workers, and that he was also right in seeing capitalism's violent destructiveness as something that could only be overcome by the revolutionary mobilization of the working class.

Luxemburg was alert to new organizational problems in the socialist movement. She was concerned over the rise of a bureaucratic-conservatism of the organizational apparatus of the German Social Democracy. Her critical discussion of the reality of bureaucracy in the labor movement became an important new component of Marxist thought. Luxemburg felt this bureaucratic-conservatism could only be overcome by greater working-class democracy in the movement and by the semi-spontaneous mass actions of the workers that would periodically be generated by the workings of capitalism. She insisted that capitalism would not be ended unless the working class itself – organized and mobilized by effective revolutionary organizations – consciously and actively brought about the transition to socialism.

One of the most serious Marxist theorists to deal with the question of organization was Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, leader of the revolutionary wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party known as

the Bolsheviks. ("Bolshevik" means majority-ite.) By 1912 they broke away to form their own separate revolutionary party, which soon came to represent the majority of the Russian working class. The example and ideas of Lenin and his comrades have powerfully influenced many others for the past century – including the International Socialist Organization.

Lenin's conception of organization defined members of the revolutionary party as (1) being in basic agreement with the revolutionary Marxist program, (2) paying dues to help sustain the organization's activities, and (3) working together with other comrades as part of the organization – carrying out the activities jointly decided upon by the party. This included sharing socialist ideas with more and more workers, as well as being involved in social struggles, political struggles, trade union activity, and so on. He insisted that the party must be both democratic and cohesive, effectively combining local initiative and national coordination.

From his earliest days in the socialist movement, Lenin insisted on taking seriously Marxist theory but also taking activism and organization seriously – calling for freedom of discussion, unity in action. Lenin shared with others a commitment to what was called democratic centralism, though he was more consistent than many others. He favored free, critical-minded discussion before decisions were made – but once the decisions were made, they should be implemented by the organization as a whole. Decisions should be democratically made, but one of the meanings of democracy is that such decisions should not be blocked by those who disagreed with them. He believed that the organization's leadership should be chosen by and answerable to the membership, but then its authority should be respected by the membership. He favored a significant degree of local autonomy, but also a significant degree of national coordination. Decisions of the organization should – at appropriate times – be critically evaluated, but the entire organization should be involved in that process. This could help provide a sound basis for future decisions and activities.

The organizational process favored by Lenin highlights the dynamic quality of his conception of the revolutionary party. The highest decision-making body of the organization is the national convention (or party congress), held at regular and short-term intervals, made up of democratically chosen delegates from all of the local branches of the organization. There should be full discussion and debate within the branches and throughout the organization, before the convention takes place, around the matters to be decided at the convention. The convention should elect a national leadership – a national committee and a more compact political committee – to oversee the organization's activities (and help ensure the carrying out of decisions) between national conventions.

The purpose of all this, of course, was to have a cohesive organization capable of reaching out more and more effectively to increasing numbers of Russia's laboring and oppressed majority. Bolshevik efforts culminated in a revolutionary alliance of the workers and peasants of Russia. As a Marxist organization, the Bolshevik party gave special attention to education and mobilization of the working class against the absolute monarchy represented by Tsarism, and also against capitalism. Because the most oppressed layers of the working class – women workers – were among those the Bolshevik party reached out to, they were to play a key role in the 1917 revolution.

Crises of war, Tsarist tyranny, and capitalist irrationality brought about a mass revolutionary upsurge. This was organized on the ground by working-class activists educated and trained in the Russian socialist movement over a period of years. Lenin and his comrades (particularly Leon Trotsky) rallied a majority of the workers and peasants to carry out the triumphant revolution of 1917. They hoped to create a working-class democracy (in alliance with the peasants) that would move forward to socialism – although they insisted that genuine socialism could only be created on a global scale. This had a powerful impact throughout the world. Lenin, Trotsky, and others – taking on the name "Communists" in order to distinguish themselves from non-revolutionary elements in

the socialist movement – helped to create a worldwide network based on the revolutionary program and organizational principles that had animated them, the Communist International.

## **Lenin and Kindred Spirits**

Contrary to common misconceptions, Lenin's organizational outlook was not unique to him. In fact, even Karl Kautsky – who ended up badly compromising his own Marxist convictions – had in earlier years given eloquent expression to revolutionary political and organizational perspectives. People like Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky, Antonio Gramsci (a brilliant founder and leader of the Italian Communist Party in the 1920s) and others – influenced by the revolutionary orientation of Marx – shared the organizational orientation we are discussing here.

A few brief quotes from Luxemburg, Trotsky and Gramsci can be offered as a summary of what is often portrayed as a distinctively “Leninist” organizational perspective. Of course, Trotsky and Gramsci ended up as explicit adherents of “Leninism,” but Luxemburg has never been accused of that. Nonetheless, in her *Mass Strike* pamphlet she characterized the socialist party as “the most enlightened, most class-conscious vanguard of the proletariat,” interacting with “every spontaneous people's movement” in order to “hasten the development of things and endeavor to accelerate events,” and she called for a “social-democratic centralism” in order to make such efforts effective – terming this as “the the ‘self-centralism’ of the advanced sectors of the proletariat.” It was in this spirit that Lenin asserted that “the working class is instinctively, spontaneously socialist, and more than ten years of work put in by the socialist movement has done a great deal to transform this spontaneity into consciousness.” Engaging with the same conceptualizations, Trotsky wrote: “In the revolutionary vanguard, organized in a party, is crystallized the aspiration of the masses to obtain their freedom,” adding that “revolutionary education requires a regime of internal democracy. Revolutionary discipline has nothing to do with blind obedience,” for “the will to struggle has on every occasion to be independently renewed and tempered.” Similarly, Gramsci insisted that a revolutionary party is necessary “in order to construct an intellectual-moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass and not only of small intellectual groups.” Warning that the revolutionary organization must not fall into “neglecting, or worse still despising, so-called ‘spontaneous’ moments” of mass action among the workers and oppressed, he also – like Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky – emphasized an interplay “between ‘spontaneity’ and ‘conscious leadership’,” and a “democratic centralism, which is so to speak a ‘centralism’ in movement – a continual adaptation of the organization to the real movement.” [1]

The outlook of these revolutionaries adds up to this: a revolutionary socialist organization needs to be an organized force that is both democratic and cohesive, critical-minded and disciplined, that will be active in actual working-class struggles of all kinds – helping to make them effective – while at the same time helping to spread socialist ideas. Socialist organizations can help to spread such ideas and also vital organizing skills, but they must be able to learn from working-class activists who are not (or not yet) in the socialist organization, at the same time reaching out to such activists – who constitute a vanguard layer of the working class – and drawing more and more of them into the organized socialist movement. Such a movement, if it is effective in sharing more and more socialist consciousness and political organizing skills, can assume mass proportions, becoming a powerful sub-culture in society, a moral-intellectual bloc, which has the potential for bringing about a fundamental power-shift, a power-shift that can result in a transition to socialism.

These organizational conceptions found expression in the perspectives of the Communist International founded in 1919. They animated the early Communist movement before its mainstream was irredeemably polluted by the authoritarianism represented by Joseph Stalin. This authoritarian



corruption that developed in the Communist movement is related to the fact that a key development expected by Lenin, Trotsky and other Bolsheviks was blocked – and this problem would eventually throw their revolutionary-democratic socialism off the tracks. Russia was a huge but economically backward, impoverished country. Along with Marx, the Bolsheviks believed that socialism could only be achieved in more advanced economies that had sufficient resources to provide a decent life for all. They also believed – with Marx – that global capitalism could only be replaced on a world scale, and that the economically more developed socialist countries could work cooperatively with economically less advanced regions (such as Russia) to develop a global socialist economy beneficial to all. They believed that the Russian Revolution would – over the next decade or so – help to inspire socialist revolutions in more and more countries, especially given the incredibly destructive nature of capitalism.

## **Stalinism versus Revolutionary Marxism**

It is true that capitalism was incredibly destructive – it had generated a devastating, imperialist World War, it was generating murderous fascist and Nazi movements, it would soon generate the Great Depression, and after that it would bring about an even more horrific Second World War. But the working-class movements in other countries had not developed organizations that were politically strong enough to bring about socialist revolutions. There were revolutionary uprisings, but they were defeated.

Germany came very close to the working-class coming to power, but by then the German Social-Democratic Party was dominated by reformists who blocked the overthrow of capitalism, and — guaranteed government positions by the powers that be — it collaborated with Germany's upper classes to divert the revolutionary upsurge into non-revolutionary channels. In the wake of the almost-revolution, growing right-wing forces in Germany carried out a vicious campaign to murder revolutionary workers and their leaders – such as Rosa Luxemburg. Such defeats meant that revolutionary Russia was isolated in a hostile capitalist world, and this soon led to the weakening, decline, and authoritarian corruption of Communism.

Some of the leading Communists in Russia were deciding to build their own power, their own control of the state and party organizational apparatus. This apparatus – increasingly separate from the working people – is what we call the bureaucracy. Those dominating this bureaucracy wanted to build up their own power in order to modernize Russia while also taking more and more material privileges for themselves (modernization plus selfishness). Not all of the Communists were inclined to go in this direction – Lenin, for example, did not favor such a development, but after his death in 1924, Joseph Stalin helped to initiate a power struggle which resulted in this decisive shift.

Stalin and his supporters utilized revolutionary rhetoric but left the old revolutionary commitments behind. They turned the Communist Party into a very different kind of organization – one that was neither democratic nor revolutionary – in order to achieve their purposes (modernization plus bureaucratic selfishness), largely at the expense of the masses of workers and peasants. Many people throughout the world came to view Lenin's organizational outlook as one that is extremely undemocratic, and to view Marxism as extremely rigid and dogmatic, because these became characteristic of Communism as it developed under Stalin. But this so-called Marxism-Leninism of Stalin was not revolutionary, not Marxist, and not Leninist, although it claimed to be. It was designed to advance the purposes of the bureaucratic dictatorship.

What Stalinism certainly did not do was to defend the principles of workers' democracy that had animated the Russian Revolution in 1917, nor did it help to advance the revolutionary principles that had animated the early Communist movement. There were Russian Communists who defended the

original democratic and revolutionary principles – and they often fought heroically, but they were defeated, and most of them ended up giving their lives for what they believed in.

These uncorrupted political and organizational perspectives have guided those seeking to remain true to the revolutionary Marxist method and goal. This was especially the case among many of those who gathered around the banner of Trotsky, as he opposed the Stalinist distortion of the Communist movement. The fact that the mainstream of the Communist movement throughout the world came under the domination of Stalinism greatly weakened the left-wing of the labor movement. But over and over again, the nature of capitalism has caused the old revolutionary perspectives – including Lenin's Bolshevik orientation – to remain relevant. That is why revolutionary Marxism flared up and had an impact within the momentous class struggles of the 1930s. Although capitalism continued to change in significant ways, it also remained the same in significant ways, generating struggle through the following decades. The revolutionary Marxist outlook continued to resonate within the insurgencies of the 1960s. Human rights struggles throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century were influenced by these perspectives. The International Socialist Organization represents a continuity with such perspectives.

### **Building a Revolutionary Organization**

The problems that capitalism creates for the diverse sectors of the working class, and for the working class as a whole, continue to generate discontent and struggle in our own time – although there is a crying need for the struggles to become more effective. Such effectiveness is not automatically or inevitably achieved. Even though a majority of the working class – which is the great majority of the people in the United States – opposes the present-day imperialist wars and occupations, we see a continuation of the violent foreign policy that advances the interests of the rich, at our expense and at the expense of people of other countries. To the extent that there are significant mobilizations against such policies, they are powerfully influenced by socialist organizations.

The only way that such struggles can be organized and advanced is if people work hard to organize and advance them. To a significant degree, those who organize such struggles – including some of the sharpest struggles today for economic justice – have been influenced by revolutionary and socialist perspectives, and have learned organizing skills from experienced socialist activists. But so far, this has not been enough. More and more working-class people need to be drawn into tough, democratic trade unions and social movements that are not afraid to fight hard for what they believe in.

If Marx was right (and we think he was) there is also a need to bring about a mass socialist consciousness. Socialism and the struggles of the working class cannot remain separate from each other if either is to be victorious. Because such things do not happen automatically or inevitably, it is important for more and more of us – who by and large happen to be part of our vast, multi-faceted working class – to work very hard to help bring such things about. It is easier to work effectively if more and more of us work together in a democratic and coherent manner. This means being part of a socialist organization guided by the revolutionary Marxist traditions touched on in this presentation.

Consistent with such organizational traditions, are two kinds of growth – what might be called reaching out and reaching in. Marxist organizations must reach out to share socialist ideas and analyses essential for socialist consciousness; to participate in struggles of the working class – through unions, community groups, and social movements; and to draw more and more people to activism and socialist consciousness. They must at the same time reach in, reach inward, building up their organization by recruiting new members and by learning, learning from others inside and



outside the organization, and also absorbing more and more experience – all of which enhances their ability to reach out; their members must develop their understanding of working-class history and socialist theory, and of current realities; and the members must develop their own political experience and organizational skills – experience and skills both for outreach efforts and for “internal” activity.

The socialist organization must not be outside of the working class but instead must be organically connected to it, in large measure through helping to build reform struggles, social movements, and trade unions. These are interactive with each other, with the socialist organization, and with the working class as a whole. This interaction helps to transform each and all of the interactive elements.

The socialist organization brings a valuable mix of socialist theory, political analysis, activist experience, and organizational skills into the larger struggles and movements of the working class. But all of these are further developed and added to by the socialist organization’s engagement with the various components of the class struggle. The organization itself is renewed, expanded, and revitalized. The trade unions and social movements are strengthened and their perspectives deepened by what the socialists have to bring. Within the working class as a whole, at least in this chart, a radicalization process is underway which enables the working class to play a powerful role in the current economic, social and political situation, and to alter the course of history.

If we do our work right, then a deepening class-consciousness may generate a mass labor party, animated by a socialist consciousness, that will be capable of bringing the working-class majority to power, opening the way for a socialist reconstruction of society.

This is the approach with which Marxists hope to build a massive working-class force capable of bringing socialism into the world. That is quite a tall order, however, and because this is about things that are so incredibly important, we cannot afford to end the discussion here. It will be crucial for us to learn from our experiences in trying to apply Marxist organizational perspectives to the realities around us.

## **Paul Le Blanc**

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## **P.S.**

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## Footnotes

[[1](#)] Quotations taken from Paul Le Blanc, *From Marx to Gramsci* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1996), 58-60.