

Strategy and Party - Talk given at an FI youth camp

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The question of “strategy” is once again in vogue, as is the word itself. This may seem trivial, but things were quite different in the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s. The talk at the time was mostly about resistance; and discussions about strategy had practically vanished. It was all about holding firm, without necessarily knowing how we were going to get out of this defensive situation. The discussion around problems of strategy has resumed because the situation itself has evolved. Put simply, since the advent of the Social Forums the rallying cry “another world is possible” has become a slogan on a mass level or has at least circulated very widely. The questions that come up now are: “What other world is possible?” and “What other world do we want?” and above all “How do we get to this other world that is possible and necessary?” And that is the question of strategy – not only the need to change the world but also the need to find an answer to the question of how to change it and how to be in a position to change it.

Preliminary remarks

To begin with, when we speak of strategy, tactics and even – in the tradition of Italian comrades who know Gramsci – notions of wars of position, wars of movement, and so on, we use a vocabulary that has been borrowed from the military and especially from textbooks on military history. This became part of the vocabulary of the workers movement at the beginning of the 20th century. That being said, though, we should be very clear: when revolutionaries talk about strategy, it’s not only a matter of violent confrontations or military confrontations with the state apparatus. Rather, what we are talking about is a series of slogans and forms of political organization; and a set of politics, all aimed at transforming the world.

Secondly, the question of strategy has two complementary dimensions in the history of the working-class movement. For starters, there is the question of how to take power in a given country. This comes from the notion that revolution begins with the conquest of power in one country, or in several, but in either case on the level of nations, within which class relations and the relationship of forces are organized on the basis of a specific history, specific social gains, and a specific set of

relationships set down in law. This side of the question – the conquest of power in a single country such as Bolivia or Venezuela today, and let's hope in a European country sometime soon – is still very much on the agenda and is fundamental. Saying this stands in contrast to the claims of certain currents – such as those in Latin America and Italy inspired by Antonio Negri – who believe that the question of the conquest of power in a single country is outdated and perhaps even reactionary because it limits struggles within the framework of individual nations. We believe that the question of the struggle for power still begins on the level of the national relationship of forces, but that is ever more closely intertwined with the second dimension of the strategic question – that of strategy on an international, continental and now global scale. This was already the case at the beginning of the 20th century; and hence the meaning of the idea of permanent revolution – where it was a matter of beginning to settle the matter of revolution in one or several countries, while the question of socialism was immediately raised by the extension of the revolution to an entire continent or to the whole world. This question was fundamental for revolutionaries of Lenin, Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg's generation and it is even more so for us today. We see confirmation of this in Venezuela, where oil can be nationalized and a certain degree of independence from imperialism can be achieved, but this remains limited so long as the revolutionary process has not been extended to Bolivia, Ecuador and as a project for all of Latin America, which is the Bolivarian Revolution. So we have this two-fold problem – that of taking power in certain countries but with a view to using this as a springboard for spreading the social revolution internationally.

One final introductory remark: the problem with revolutionary strategy is that it means taking up a real challenge that is not resolved in Marx's work. Workers in general – the working class – are ground down not only physically but also morally and intellectually by the conditions of exploitation. In page after page of *Capital*, Marx describes the abasement that comes from work, the absence of leisure and the impossibility of finding time to enjoy life, to read and to learn. How can a class that endures such total oppression simultaneously be capable of imagining and building a new society? Marx suggests that the problem would be resolved in an almost natural fashion: the industrialization of the late 19th century was creating an increasingly concentrated – and as a result increasingly organized – working class, which was therefore increasingly conscious. The contradiction between the conditions of life in which it was exploited and crushed, and the need to build a new world, would be settled by a kind of almost spontaneous dynamic of history. But the entire experience of the last century has been that capital continuously reproduces divisions among the exploited; and that ideology (the dominant one) also dominates the dominated. This is not only because the media manipulate public opinion, even though this is true and increasingly so, but also because the conditions of domination of the exploited, including those of an ideological nature, are rooted in the work relationship itself – given that workers control neither their instruments of labour nor the goals of production. As Marx said, workers are appendages of the machine more than they are its masters. This is why many phenomena in the modern world appear to human beings as strange and mysterious forces. We are told that we shouldn't do this or that because the markets will get angry, as if the markets were omnipotent figures, as if money itself were an omnipotent figure, and so on. I can't get into this now, but it's important to say that capitalist social relations create a world of illusions, a fantasy world, that the dominated also endure and from which they must free themselves.

This is the reason why spontaneous struggles against exploitation, oppression and discrimination are necessary. These struggles are, if you will, fuel for the revolution. But spontaneous struggles are not enough to break the vicious circle of relations between capital and labour. There has to be a share of consciousness and will, a conscious element; and that is the element of political action and political determination that is borne by a party. A party is not foreign to the society in which it exists. Even in the most revolutionary of organizations, you encounter the effects of the division of labour and of alienation – of alienation from sport, for example, since that's very much in the air this summer – but a revolutionary organization at least equips itself with the means to resist collectively and to break

the spell and seductive charm of bourgeois ideology.

“Taking” power?

Taking this as a starting point, some basic things need to be said. People ask us, “But what does being a revolutionary in the 21st century actually mean? Do you support violence?” To begin with, as Chairman Mao used to say, a revolution is not a dinner party. The adversary is ferocious and powerful, so the class struggle is indeed a struggle — a struggle which is in many respects merciless, and not because we have decided it should be so. So there is indeed such a thing as legitimate revolutionary violence; but we shouldn’t make a fetish out of it, and for us it isn’t a revolution’s main characteristic. We’d even love to be pacifists, with everyone loving each other. But you first have to create the conditions for that to happen. The thing that defines the revolution for us, though, is the need to change a world that is increasingly unjust – and, indeed, increasingly violent. And changing the world precisely requires us to achieve the conquest of power.

But what does taking power mean? It’s not about grabbing hold of an instrument, taking up positions or taking over the state apparatus. Taking power means transforming relations of power and property. It’s about making power less and less the power of some people over others and more and more a collective, shared undertaking. To achieve this you have to change property relations, which means tackling private property in the means of production, exchange and, increasingly these days, knowledge. Through patents and intellectual property, there is an ongoing privatization of knowledge that has been produced collectively by all humankind. Just as genes have been patented, so too languages and mathematic formulae may well be in the future. We see the privatization of space, with fewer and fewer public spaces; Mexican comrades can tell you about private roads in Mexico City, something which we’re also starting to see in Europe. We have seen privatization of the means of information and communication, and so on and so forth. For us, then, taking power means changing power; and in order to change power you have to radically overhaul property relations and reverse the current trend towards privatizing anything and everything.

How can we move beyond the domination of capital, which reproduces itself almost automatically through the organization of work, the division of labour, the commodification of leisure time, and so forth? How can we escape from this vicious circle that ends up making the oppressed support the very system that oppresses them? During the last election campaign in France I heard a worker say on TV, “How is it that the bourgeois are able to vote in line with their interests — while workers, and even a majority of workers, vote for those who go against their interests?” It’s precisely because they are under the domination of the dominant ideology. So how do we escape this?

The reformist answer was to whittle away at the system through small increases in trade-union membership, a few more votes at each election, and so forth. Of course, all those things are important. The rate of trade-union coverage and even election scores are indicators of the relationship of forces. In developed capitalist countries that have now experienced a century or more of parliamentary life, we will not go from a group of a few hundred or a few thousand members to the conquest of power without having built up a relationship of forces through organized labour and the social movements — but also in the electoral arena, in spite of its many imperfections. So that’s certainly a change over the past century that is worth noting. The reformist illusion, however, is to say – as the old formula used to go — that the electoral majority will ultimately reflect the social majority; and that, as a result, society can be changed through a straightforward electoral process. Every single experience of the 19th and 20th centuries proves the contrary. The possibility of revolutionary change only exists under relatively exceptional conditions. There are conditions of revolutionary crisis – a revolutionary situation – when a genuine metamorphosis occurs, and not

simply incremental progress but a sudden transformation in the consciousness of hundreds of thousands and millions of people. The most recent examples in Europe were May 1968 in France, Italy's "creeping May" in the summer and autumn of 1969, and Portugal in 1974-1975. We can debate whether each situation was truly revolutionary or not, to what degree and so forth. Still, these were experiences where one saw how people, as the saying goes, learn more in a few days than in years and years of speeches, workshops and the like. Consciousness races rapidly forward.

Rhythms, self-organization, winning majority support, internationalism

For starters, any notion of revolutionary strategy has to begin with the idea that the class struggle has rhythms; there is ebb and flow, but there are especially periods of crisis during which the relationship of forces can be radically altered, creating the possibility of changing the world or at least changing society.

There is a second fundamental idea (and these are very general points) stemming from all the victorious or defeated revolutionary experiences that one looks at in the 19th or 20th century – from the Paris Commune through to the Carnation Revolution in Portugal and the Unidad Popular experience in Chile. In every situation of more or less revolutionary crisis, forms of dual power emerge – that is to say, organs of power that are external to existing institutions. In Italy in 1920-1921, it was factory councils; in Russia, it was the soviets; in Germany in 1923, it was the workers councils; in Chile in 1971-1973, it was the *cordones industriales* (workers committees) and *comandos comunales* (neighbourhood committees); and in Portugal in 1975, it was the neighbourhood and occupied-factory committees, which reached their high point at the Setubal assembly. Every case of intense class struggle leads to the emergence of organs of what we call self-organization – of democratic organization specific to the people and to workers, and which counterpose their legitimacy to that of existing institutions. That doesn't mean there is absolute opposition between the two. All through the year 1917, the Bolsheviks combined the demand for a constituent assembly elected through universal suffrage with the building of the soviets. There is a transfer of legitimacy from one organ to the other that is anything but automatic. You have to demonstrate in practise that the organs of people's power are more effective in a time of crisis – more democratic and more legitimate than the institutions of the bourgeoisie. But there can be no truly revolutionary situation without the appearance of at least some elements of what we call the duality of power or dual power.

The third idea is that of winning majority support as a pre-condition for revolution. What sets a revolution apart from a putsch or coup d'état is that it is a movement that has the support of a majority of the population. We have to follow to the letter the notion that the emancipation of workers will be achieved by workers themselves; and that, however determined and courageous revolutionaries may be, they cannot make a revolution in the name of the majority of the population. This was a major debate at the initial congresses of the Communist International, especially at the third and fourth congresses following the disaster of what was called the March Action in Germany in 1921 – which had indeed been a minority, putschist action (on the scale of the whole country, that is, while still involving several hundreds of thousands of people). This led to a debate in the Communist International in relation to those who thought they would be able to mechanically copy the Russian Revolution. The point was to say that there was no getting around winning over a majority of the population. This wasn't about election results – since it wasn't a matter of being legalistic and saying that nothing can be done so long as we haven't won a majority in parliament – but rather about winning legitimacy in the eyes of a majority among the masses, which is a different matter.

If you read Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* – and it remains a useful book to read – you'll see how he is alert even to the slightest shift on the municipal level, in local elections and so on. In his eyes, these are indicators of the kinds of possibilities that are developing among the masses. Winning over a majority became a central issue in the Communist International from the third congress of 1921 onward, with the debate giving rise to such notions as the united front, transitional demands and, later on, especially with Gramsci, hegemony. It is a matter of winning hegemony; revolution cannot be reduced to the confrontation between capital and labour at the workplace. It is also about the proletariat's ability to demonstrate that another society is possible, with the proletariat itself as the driving force behind that endeavour. This must be demonstrated to some degree before the seizure of power lest this be a leap into the unknown, a half-hearted running jump, a smash-and-grab or a putsch. So the notion of transitional demands and that of the united front are tools for winning over a majority.

The notion of transitional demands may seem elementary. In France, we have been very happy with the Olivier Besancenot presidential campaign but, really now, a minimum wage of 1500 euros per month and a better distribution of wealth are not very revolutionary demands. A few years ago, they would even have seemed very reformist. They seem radical today because the reformists don't even bother with such things anymore. Demands and slogans don't have any magical virtues; they have no inherent value outside a given situation, as the starting point for a newly awakened consciousness. When we say that you can't live decently in a country like France with less than 1500 euros per month, we are told that we aren't realistic and that if we increase wages there will be capital flight. That raises another question: how can we prevent capital flight? We have to tackle financial speculation and private property. The right to housing raises the question of private property in land and real estate. So these are demands that, at a given point in time, crystallize problems that people can understand and that can be used as springboards to mobilize thousands or hundreds of thousands of people. This in turn makes it possible to learn incrementally through action – and not only from words and speeches – about the logic of the capitalist system and why even such elementary and legitimate demands collide head-on with this logic.

This debate may seem elementary to you today. But in the debates of the Communist International, those who wanted to copy the Russian Revolution called for the immediate arming of the proletariat. Yes, of course, in order to resist the enemy it does indeed have to come to that. But before getting to that point, there first has to be a thoroughgoing awakening of consciousness that starts from the most basic demands such as the sliding scale of wages, the sharing of work time, and so forth. These may be very straightforward for us, but were anything but a foregone conclusion at the time. They were the subject of very heated and very persistent debates in the Communist International. When it comes to demands seen as necessary and fundamental by most people, we call for the broadest unity among all those prepared to wage a serious struggle in their support. This is why transitional demands are linked to the question of the united front. We know full well that reformists won't see things through to the very end. We know that they will yield to threats and capitulate outright if capital hands them an ultimatum. Still, the journey together will be of pedagogical value to those who really do want to struggle to the very end in defence of basic needs and culture – the right to decent living conditions, health, education, housing and so forth. Forward strides can be made on this basis.

Finally, the fourth idea is that since we don't think that a revolution can lead to a more egalitarian society in one country alone, hemmed in by the world market, we seek to build an international relationship of forces from the outset. Building an international movement is part of the program. This takes the form of an International if possible, but also networks such as the European Anti-Capitalist Left, meetings of the revolutionary Left in Latin America, and so forth. This is not a technical matter; it's the translation into practise of a political approach to the international

character of revolution.

Strategic hypotheses and not a model

In the 12 minutes that are left, I'd like to take up two final points. First, we are often asked if we have a model for the society we wish to build. We have no such model. You can't say that the emancipation of workers will be achieved by workers themselves and also claim to be carrying a blueprint of the future society in your backpack. What we do have, however, is the memory of a series of experiences of struggles, revolutions, victories and defeats that we can carry with us, preserve and pass on to others. What we have isn't a model for society but rather the hypotheses for a revolutionary strategy.

In developed capitalist countries, where wage earners account for a large majority of the active population, we work with the idea of an insurrectional general strike. This may appear to some as an idea from the 20th century or even the 19th, but it doesn't mean that revolution will necessarily take the form of a perfect general strike — a general strike that has armed pickets and is insurrectional. But it does mean that our work is organized in line with this perspective. Through struggles, local strikes, regional strikes and sectoral strikes, we try to familiarize workers with the idea of the general strike. This is crucial because in crisis situations it's what can lead to a spontaneous mass reaction in that direction. At the time of the Pinochet coup d'état in Chile in September 1973, president Allende didn't call for a general strike even though he could still broadcast over the radio. Had there been methodical and systematic work in this direction, there could have been a spontaneous general strike with factory occupations. This might not have prevented the coup d'état but it would certainly have made it much more difficult. What's more, a struggle lost with a fight is always resumed much more easily than one lost without a fight. That is practically an iron law of all the experiences of the 20th century. Working with the idea of a general strike doesn't mean calling for one all the time; but it does mean nurturing the idea so that it almost becomes labour's reflexive response to attacks from employers, in the face of a coup d'état or anti-democratic repression. It is difficult to imagine that the July 1936 uprising in Catalonia and Spain against the coup d'état could have taken place in the absence of the preparatory work done by the POUM and the anarchists, without the 1934 experience in Asturias, and so forth. To work with the perspective of a general strike doesn't mean that you proclaim it foolishly and abstractly, but rather that you try to seize upon every experience that in any case creates habits and familiarity, and develops reflexes, in the working-class movement. Insurrection isn't necessarily the stylized view of it that you see in Eisenstein's - superb — film about the October insurrection in Russia. It can take very simple forms such as self-defence on a picket line; and work in the army and soldiers committees when there was a conscription army in France and Portugal. It is a matter of disrupting the bourgeoisie's forces of repression. These are unifying threads that enable us to make the link between daily struggles, however modest, and our ultimate objective.

These days many comrades in Italy, France and elsewhere too, I think, have been focusing on the need to build organizations that are independent of the parties of social-liberalism, Social Democracy and so forth. But why do we want independent organizations? It's because we have a different goal and because we have an idea of where we want to go. We know that — while it may win us some small reforms — participating alongside Social Democrats in a bourgeois government takes us further from our goal rather than bringing us closer to it, because it increases confusion and doesn't create clarity. Of course, if we don't concern ourselves with the matter of an ultimate goal and with that of having, not a definitive answer, but at least some idea of how we plan on getting there, then we will be sent reeling by the simplest tactical challenge, by the slightest electoral disappointment, by the mildest setback, and so on. You need clear ideas to build something

that will last into the long term. In all likelihood, revolution will catch us by surprise. Future revolutions will never be a simple repetition of past revolutions, for the basic reason that societies are no longer the same. I often say that our situation is like the one familiar to armies, who are trained in military colleges on the basis of past battles. But new battles are never the same and that's why people say that armies are always one war behind. And we always run the risk of being one revolution behind. Even the most revolutionary among us are taken by surprise. Despite their reputation, for example, the Bolsheviks were split at the time of the October insurrection. No revolutionary organization is a monolithic party of steel. The ultimate test will come when the opportunity for revolution presents itself.

The party question

The final point I wanted to take up is the question of the party. It's not a technical question – that is to say, it's not a matter of saying that we have a strategy and therefore need the instrument best suited to it. No, the question of the party is actually central to the strategic question itself. A strategy without a party is like a military officer who has battle plans and maps from army headquarters but no troops or army. There can only be a strategy when there is a force that supports it, teases it out and translates it into practice day by day. This is the whole difference between the notion of the party in the big Social Democratic parties before 1914 and Lenin's notion of the party. (Today, poor old Lenin isn't very popular, even on the Left and even on the radical Left. He's described as being authoritarian and so on, and I think that's grossly unfair. But that's not today's topic.) How did Lenin change or even revolutionize the notion of the party? The big Social Democratic parties saw their role as essentially pedagogical, whereby it played the role of teacher. This was based on a conception in which the mass movement had a kind of spontaneous logic to which the party contributed ideas, with interesting schools and so forth. As a famous Social Democratic leader from the pre-1914 period said, the party's role is not to prepare for revolution. Lenin took the exact opposite approach. His view was that the party should not limit itself to accompanying and informing the experience of the masses, but should also take initiatives, lay down objectives for struggle, suggest demands that correspond to a given situation and, when the time comes, be in a position to guide action. This can be summarized in a formula: the notion that prevailed during the glory days of the Second International was that of a pedagogical or educational party; with Lenin and in the Third International the prevailing notion was that of a strategizing party – a party that organizes struggles based on suggested goals, that can also organize and limit defeats by preparing a retreat when necessary. A famous episode comes to mind. The workers of Petrograd and Moscow could have suffered a decisive defeat in July 1917 had there not been a party to organize a retreat and retake the initiative. So the party isn't any ordinary instrument. It is inseparable from the program and goal that we set for ourselves.

There's one more thing I'd like to say to wrap up my comments on the party question. For us, it's not just about building a party for struggle, action, combat, and so forth. It has to be a democratic, pluralist party. This has occasionally been a problem in our tradition; it has led to excesses, an obsession with tendencies, and so forth. That can be useful sometimes, while other times it is less so. Still, though, in spite of the drawbacks, we feel very strongly about this. Pluralism within the organization means that we do not hold any definitive truths and that there is a constant exchange between the party that we wish to build and the experiences of the mass movement. Since these experiences are quite diverse, this diversity may be reflected from time to time as currents within our own ranks. There is an additional reason. We fight for a pluralist society, and we believe that a plurality of parties is possible within such a society – including a plurality of parties that support socialism. We take such a position on the basis of lessons drawn from the experience of Stalinism. It is only logical, then, that we should develop democracy within our own organizations, in our youth

organizations and in the sections of the International – but also in the work we seek to develop in unions and social-movement organizations.

It is essential that different views of the world be reflected within common organizations – because this makes struggles more effective; because there can't be unity without democracy; and because we want broad unity against Sarkozy or whomever. So democracy is a pre-condition for unity, not an obstacle. This democratic culture will play an important role in the future, because bureaucracy and bureaucratization don't come from Stalinism alone. Some believe this problem has gone the way of Stalinism, but it definitely has not. Bureaucracy doesn't come from the party — or as some say today “the party form”. Rather, it comes from the social division of labour and inequality. Labour unions and social-movement organizations aren't less bureaucratic than parties – and are sometimes more so given that material interests are involved. Third World NGOs, which live off subsidies from the Ford Foundation or the German SPD's Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, are in large measure just as bureaucratized and often even corrupt. Bureaucracy doesn't come from any specific organizational form. The roots of bureaucracy are to be found in the division of labour between intellectual and manual labour, in the unequal distribution of free time, and so forth and so on. This means that democracy in society and in our organizations is the only weapon at our disposal.

This is even more important today, and I'll end on this point. There is a widespread view that people are dragooned into a party, that it's like the military — with discipline, authority, the loss of each member's individuality, and so forth. I think the exact opposite is true. You can't be free all by yourself and you can't be inspired all by yourself. You become these things in an organization of collective struggle, within the boundaries of your own individuality. If you look at recent political experiences, parties, even our small parties, remain the best form for resisting far worse forms of bureaucratization and corruption by money — notwithstanding their drawbacks and the dangers of bureaucratization,. We live in a society where money is everywhere and corrupts everything. What resistance can we put up to this? It isn't by moralizing, but rather by organizing collective resistance against the power of money. We are also up against the power of media, which is sometimes one and the same as the power of money. Media tend to usurp the language and spokespeople of social-movement organizations and revolutionary organizations. A mechanism exists whereby media co-opt political figures. It's the TV networks that decide that so-and-so has a nice face, so-and-so looks good under the lights, so-and-so is nicer to work with, and on it goes. They create stars, whereas we want to maintain control over our words and our spokespeople. We don't believe in supreme saviours and miracle workers. We know that what we do is the result of collective experience and thinking. That's a lesson in responsibility and humility.

The major role of media in our societies has undermined accountability. How many times have we seen people promote a set of hare-brained ideas on TV one day and then move on to something entirely different the following week – without ever having to justify themselves and be accountable for what they have said? When our spokespeople speak – whether Francisco Louça in Portugal, Olivier Besancenot in France or Franco Turigliatto in Italy – they are accountable to hundreds and thousands of members. They are not individuals speaking on a whim, on the basis of a fleeting emotion; they speak on behalf of the collective and have responsibilities toward the members who elected them. For us, this is further proof of our democratic credentials. And contrary to what is often said, political parties as we see them – and I'm not talking about big electoralist outfits – are the best method of putting up a specifically democratic resistance to a world that is not democratic at all. Parties are one of the links, one of the components of our conception of revolutionary strategy.

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P.S.

* Translation from French: Nathan Rao for International Viewpoint.