

The Comintern as a school of socialist strategy

Saturday 8 September 2012, by [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 3 September 2012).

Contents

- [A strategic system](#)
- [1a. The goal of workers' power](#)
- [2. Revolutionary party](#)
- [3. Hegemony](#)
- [4. Alliance with oppressed](#)
- [5a. United front](#)
- [Ecosocialism](#)

In his review of my edition of the *Communist International's Fourth Congress (1922)*, [\[1\]](#) Ian Birchall warns against a "scriptural approach" to the Comintern record, but also affirms that studying it "can be of great value." [\[2\]](#) Where can this value be found? A controversy among Marxists over this year's elections in Greece points our way to an answer.

A sustained upsurge of mass struggles in Greece led to elections in which a workers' party, Syriza, made a bid for governmental power. Syriza's goal was to unite the working class around the project of a "left government" with a far-reaching anti-austerity program. Marxist forces internationally and in Greece divided on whether to support the left-government project.

There is an underlying question here: When is it appropriate for workers' parties to seek to form a government? This issue was much debated in the Communist International (Comintern) in Lenin's time. The Fourth Congress (1922) proposed that a workers' government might be formed, initially, in a parliamentary framework, provided that the regime rested on a revolutionary mass movement and took steps toward challenging capitalist power. [\[3\]](#) A minority disagreed, maintaining that a workers' government could only be formed after a successful socialist revolution.

Both positions have implications for Greece today. The Fourth Congress decision implied that the Syriza left-government project was, at least, worth consideration. The logic of the minority position was that Syriza's "left government" project should be rejected out of hand.

A closer look at the early Comintern record, however, shows that the "workers' government" decision did not stand alone. It formed part of a sweeping discussion of socialist strategy.

What, then, is strategy?

Leon Trotsky remarked in 1928 that revolutionary strategy is multi-faceted. It embraces, he said, "a *combined system* of actions which by their *association, consistency*, and growth must lead the proletariat to the conquest of power." [\[4\]](#) [\[5\]](#)

The four Comintern congresses held in Lenin's lifetime (1919-1922) adopted the elements of such a "combined system of actions." Let us briefly survey the components of the Comintern's strategic

plan and test its relevance to current conditions.

A strategic system

The early Comintern's major strategic decisions are listed below, in categories, together with a notation of the congresses that adopted them. [6]

1. Workers' power

The struggle for workers' power (1st congress)

Socializing the economy under workers' rule (3rd, 4th)

2. Revolutionary party

Role, structure of Communist Party (2nd, 3rd, 4th)

Labour party (2nd)

Comintern Statutes and conditions for admission (2nd)

3. Hegemony

Within the working class

Trade unions, factory committees (2nd, 4th)

Participation in bourgeois parliaments (2nd)

Cooperatives (3rd)

Exploited independent producers

Farmers (2nd, 4th)

Oppressed layers

Women (3rd)

Youth (3rd, 4th)

4. Alliance with oppressed peoples

National, colonial questions (2nd, Baku, Far East, 4th)

Black liberation (4th)

5. United front, transitional demands, and workers' government (3rd, 4th)

1a. The goal of workers' power

When the Comintern was formed in 1919, its program for power was straightforward: the workers' councils that then existed in many countries of Europe should overthrow capitalist rule and establish revolutionary governments on the pattern of the Russian soviets' assumption of power in October 1917.

What does the model of the Russian October Revolution mean to us today? I'd like to refer here to the programmatic guide of an organization that looks to the early Comintern as part of its heritage, *Where We Stand: The Politics of the International Socialist Organization* [7]. This pamphlet does a good job of conveying and updating many of the early Comintern's strategic insights.

The ISO guide defines workers' power in terms of the "formation by workers themselves of democratically elected institutions of struggle and control, in order to socialize production and transform it into the property of the people as a whole" (p. 7).

This summary – inspired by the Russian example – refers to events that, in the Russian case, took place at different times. The formation of workers' institutions of struggle (soviets) took place in February 1917, while the socialization of the economy was carried through in the second half of 1918. The text thus correctly deals with socialist revolution not as a moment in time but as a process.

The ISO guide omits mention of the formation of a government based on workers' institutions of struggle, the signal achievement of the October 1917 uprising. Also significant were workers' creation of a governmental administration and armed forces, and Soviet government initiatives to promote liberation of minority nationalities, women, and other victims of oppression. The entire process extended over years, and gains in some areas (economic administration) began even as those in others (soviet democracy) were in retreat. Some of these tasks were never fully carried out: consider Lenin's harsh portrayal during 1921–23 of bourgeois influences in government administration. [8]

During the last 95 years, there has been no repetition of the Russian revolution's distinctive pattern. Nonetheless, there have been many attempts during this time to achieve workers' power, in which elements of the Russian experience have found expression – in different sequences, with different areas of inadequacy, and with various omissions. None of these attempts established workers' democracy on a durable basis – and the Russian process did not do so either.

This record suggests that the early Comintern's call for Soviet power need to be interpreted flexibly, in the expectation that future attempts to achieve workers' power may follow new and surprising paths. Above all, we should not turn our backs on attempts to establish revolutionary power simply because they deviate from the Russian model.

1b. Socializing the economy under workers' rule

During its first two years, while the Soviet government struggled to mobilize a devastated economy for defense against imperialist invaders and their Russian allies, the Comintern did not much consider economic policy in Russia. Major discussions on this topic took place at the 1921 and 1922 world congresses, and they focused on the New Economic Policy (NEP) then being introduced by the Soviet government. Under the NEP, scope was granted to private markets and small-scale capitalist production. Most industry remained socialized, but workers' management role was limited, and enterprises were asked to cover their costs through market receipts.

At the 1922 world congress, Comintern leaders said the NEP model would have to be applied in other countries that experienced socialist revolutions, at least for an initial period. Lenin and other Bolsheviks called the Soviet reality “state capitalism” and considered it compatible with workers’ rule and a step toward socialism. They did not hide its dangers; indeed, Clara Zetkin noted in 1922 that under the NEP, economic relations in Russia reflected “the written and unwritten laws of [the] world economy,” while profit-seeking nationalized enterprises come into “temporary conflict” with groups of workers. [9] Some left critics said that Soviet Russia had gone over to capitalism pure and simple. The Comintern disagreed, and gave shape to its continued support through far-reaching campaigns for material aid to Soviet Russia.

What do we make of this discussion, ninety years later? At the very least, it suggests that affixing the label “state capitalism” should not lead us to turn our backs on a revolutionary process.

The NEP debate also helps us examine the economic contradictions characteristic of the first steps toward socialism. The ISO text defines the goal of socialist revolution as a society where “production and distribution is carried out according to a democratically worked-out plan” and “all decisions about production and distribution are thought out and consciously agreed upon” (p. 4) But every decision cannot be made by everyone: decisions must be made nationally, some at the enterprise level, some left to the individual. Delegation of authority strains against centralization. Grass-roots initiatives challenge comprehensive planning. Initially, markets are needed, but they act as a transmission belt for what Michael Lebowitz called “the logic of capital,” which undermines the logic of workers’ planning. [10]

In summary, this early Comintern discussion presents us with more questions than answers. It points to contradictions inherent in the early Soviet model and to some of the practical challenges faced in every attempt by working people to establish socialized, planned economies.

2. Revolutionary party

From the Comintern, we inherit the goal of building a revolutionary party, but little indication about how to go about this process or what might be the shape of such a party in today’s conditions. The International’s major resolution on party building, which Lenin considered dangerously open to misinterpretation, [11] relates to parties of tens or hundreds of thousands of members, hailing from different ideological backgrounds and engaging in ongoing public discussion. Present reality is different; as the ISO guide states: “Nothing like the Bolshevik party today exists” (p. 33). Groups that claim today to structure themselves on the Comintern model actually function in quite a different manner than Comintern parties.

To use Birchall’s phrase, a “scriptural approach” is very dangerous here.

On a related topic, the early Comintern took an important and often overlooked initiative. It advocated that in countries where there was no mass workers’ party – chiefly, the United States and Canada – its supporters should strive to build a “labour party,” that is, an inclusive, mass workers’ party with an organic link to the unions. [12] Something resembling this concept is found in the ISO text, which supports “radical or working-class third-party alternatives” and cites Ralph Nader’s presidential campaign of 2000 (p. 19). Here in Canada, revolutionary socialists have recently contributed to building a new workers’ party, Québec Solidaire.

Clearly, the road to a revolutionary party may involve many different kinds of organizational experiments.

3. Hegemony

The Bolshevik Party before 1917 pursued a vision of social hegemony, according to which the party would win the confidence of the working class, and the workers, in turn, that of the peasantry and the oppressed nations of the tsarist empire. [13] In the first flush of postwar revolutionary upsurge, some Comintern members thought that revolutionaries could triumph without such hegemony, through minority initiatives or through the workers acting alone. In 1920, however, the Comintern resolved that socialists should seek to win broad support by working in trade unions and taking part in parliamentary elections. A year later, the International called on its parties to turn to the masses and win majority support in the working class.

In terms of an alliance with exploited and oppressed layers, there have been significant shifts since the Comintern's time. With regard to youth, the Comintern was addressing young factory workers, still in their teens, subjected to super-exploitation and distinctive forms of mistreatment. Young people today also face special problems, but in a different social context. There are few examples today of young workers' leagues of the Comintern type.

Socialists give less attention to farmers less now than in the past. Nonetheless, farmers today maintain an a global organization more firmly opposed to neo-liberalism than any mass workers International [14]. Moreover, farmers are part of a category of self-employed working people that is not contracting but expanding. The Comintern was for protecting self-employed producers against capitalist exploitation and assisting them under workers' rule.

The Comintern built a global women's movement that was in the front ranks of struggles of its time to advance women's liberation. Nonetheless, much in the early Comintern's discussions on women seems archaic to us now; Marxism was enriched in later decades by the rise of feminism and other struggles related to gender.

The Comintern's central legacy here is concept of uniting all the exploited and oppressed in a common movement around a working-class program.

4. Alliance with oppressed peoples

The early Comintern stressed the importance of the rising revolutionary struggle in the colonial and semi-colonial world to the socialist cause. The International called for support of national-revolutionary movements in these countries, including when led by non-working-class forces. How does that translate into today's world where few colonies are left and some former colonies, like India, have witnessed significant capitalist development?

Again, the ISO text is helpful. "The world is divided between oppressed and oppressor nations," and "dominant nations ... use financial, diplomatic and military means to control other nations and peoples." We must recognize "the basic right of oppressed nations to self-determination," the ISO says (p. 21).

But a great deal hangs on what we mean by self-determination. Does it involve merely a flag, a seat in the United Nations, and an army? Surely Marxists must utilize a more comprehensive concept of national sovereignty – the ability of a nation to regulate its own affairs free from the dictates of imperialist powers or international agencies. A struggle for this principle has gained strength in many countries under neo-liberalism, which has increasingly violated the sovereignty of the weaker countries.

5a. United front

The ISO guide does not contain a section on united fronts. There is a heading, “Uniting to Resist Employer Attacks,” but this relates to immediate union struggles, not overall strategy. United fronts that we engage in today are mostly of this type, aiming to achieve a specific goal or carry out a campaign.

The Comintern, however, did not limit the application of the united front to individual struggles and single issues. It proposed a united front for action around the broad range of immediate demands of working people.

A united-front program could also include demands arising from today’s conditions that could not be fully and securely achieved under capitalism. Such goals were called “transitional demands,” and their nature varies with circumstances. The early Comintern cited, as examples of transitional demands, “workers’ control of production” and “armament of the working class.” More recently, in periods of inflation, workers have often demanded, and in part achieved, indexation of wages to the cost of living. A contemporary example of a transitional demand is “climate justice,” that is, effective action to halt global warming and protect its victims.

5b. Workers’ government

Advancing a united-front program raises the question of how it is to be carried out.

The Comintern argued that a workers’ program needs to be applied by a transitional government that rests on the mass movement of working people and acts to meet their needs. Such a regime was called, depending on circumstances, a “workers’” or “workers’ and farmers’” government. It could be established through a seizure of power by workers’ councils, as in Russia, but winning a parliamentary majority could also play a role in its establishment. In any case, it would be a transitional government, striking blows at capitalist power and seeking to open the road to a socialist transformation.

The Comintern thus tied together united front, transitional demands, and workers’ government in a single arc reaching from today’s movements to a struggle for power.

Is the Comintern’s “workers’ government” projection, formulated in 1922, still relevant today? Ian Birchall thinks so, but adds a note of caution:

“Obviously there are echoes here of situations in our own world and there is much to be learnt from a study of these debates. But I remain sceptical as to whether detailed formulations from 1922 can be applied to the world of the 21st century.”

Ian’s caution is justified. The formulations of 1922 were intended not as scripture for the ages but as a guide to challenges posed at that moment, especially in Germany, France, the Balkans, and parts of Asia [15]. The 1922 congress did not analyze workers’ governments of the past (even the recent past, as in Hungary in 1919) and did not speculate about the future.

Once this proviso is understood, the issue becomes straightforward. Is it permissible for workers to strive to form a government, in situations where “democratically constituted institutions of struggle and control” do not yet exist? To this question, the Comintern answered “yes,” proposing that workers’ governments can play a transitional role toward socialist revolution.

The question of government is thus a crucial link in the Comintern’s strategic plan as a whole, which

constitutes, in Trotsky's words, the *combined system of actions leading to workers' power*.

In the case of Greece, Syriza's proposal of a united-front government of workers' parties based on a program of immediate and transitional demands, corresponds to the Comintern's concept of strategy. Whether it deserves support depends on one's reading of the Greek political situation. [16] But Comintern thinking does imply that under conditions such as those in Greece, with bourgeois rule in crisis and workers mobilized in struggle, revolutionary socialists should find a way of engaging with the question of government.

Ecosocialism

I've covered all five strands of the Comintern's strategy for socialism, but some important concepts are missing, and one of them has now become crucial: ecology. Concern for ecology has been a central facet of Marxism from the start, but over the last century, it was usually treated as a side-issue: [17] a challenge to be dealt with after the revolution, a challenge that socialist planning would look after in passing. But capitalism's ecological crisis has now grown to dimensions that threaten human survival.

Far from being something to worry about after the revolution, ecological action turns out to be essential to getting us to the revolution. It needs to be woven into the "combined system of actions" that constitute socialist strategy. This addition reminds us that socialist strategy is an open concept, which is enriched and altered through working-class experience.

Summary

The Comintern is only one of many sources of working-class strategic thinking. Some aspects of Comintern strategy seem out of step with today's conditions; on some crucial questions, the Comintern has little to tell us. Nonetheless, our main failing today seems to lie not so much in a "scriptural approach" as in letting central aspects of Comintern strategy fall from view and losing our feel for its coherence as a system.

This weakness gives urgency to Ian Birchall's injunction: "If we study [the Comintern records] carefully, without trying to read off simple slogans or directives, they can be of great value."

John Riddell, September 3, 2012

Based on a presentation to Ideas Left Out [18], August 4, 2012.

P.S.

* <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2012/09/03/the-comintern-as-a-school-of-socialist-strategy/>

Footnotes

[1] John Riddell, ed., *Toward the United Front*, Proceedings of the Fourth World Congress of the Communist International, 1922: Leiden: Brill, 2012; Chicago: Haymarket, 2012.

- [2] See on ESSF (article 26260), [Fourth Congress review: 'Grappling with the united front'](#).
- [3] See on ESSF (article 23908), [Comintern's 1922 World Congress: A 'workers' government' as a step toward socialism](#).
- [4] See on ESSF (article 26261), [The Third International After Lenin. II. Strategy and Tactics in the Imperialist Epoch \(Part 1\)](#).
- [5] The word "strategy" rarely appears in the documents of the early Comintern. In its place, in the German original, we usually find the word "die Taktik," which embraced policy and actions during the entire period from the present to a future revolution.
- [6] Most early Comintern resolutions are translated in Alan Adair, ed., *Theses, Resolutions & Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International*, London: Ink Links, 1980. Many of these resolutions can be found in the Communist International section of Marxists.org. Resolutions for each congress can also be found in the respective volumes of proceedings published by Pathfinder and Brill/Haymarket Books.
- [7] <http://www.internationalsocialist.org/pdfs/WhereWeStandPamphlet.pdf>
- [8] See, for example, Lenin's "Political Report of the Central Committee of the R.C.P.(B.)" in 1921 to the Bolsheviks' eleventh congress.
- [9] *Toward the United Front*, pp. 301-2 (Lenin), 329-31 (Zetkin).
- [10] Michael A. Lebowitz, *The Contradictions of Real Socialism: The Conductor and the Conducted*, New York: Monthly Review, 2012.
- [11] *Toward the United Front*, pp. 303-5.
- [12] For the application of the labour party concept to Canada, see Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, Victoria: Trafford, 2004.
- [13] See discussion in Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: 'What Is to Be Done?' in Context*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008.
- [14] See on ESSF (article 26262), [World farmers' alliance challenges food profiteers](#).
- [15] See on ESSF (article 22599), [The Comintern's unknown decision on workers' governments](#).
- [16] For an emphatic defense of Syriza's approach, see on ESSF (article 25423).
- [17] See John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, New York: Monthly Review, 2000.
- [18] <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2012/08/22/ideas-left-out-the-joys-of-marxist-variance/>