

# Whose Democratic Centralism? In answer to Alex Callinicos

Sunday 17 February 2013, by [KELLY Jane](#) (Date first published: 17 February 2013).

**Jane Kelly sets the record straight on how democracy is guaranteed and minorities' rights are protected in the Fourth International.**

In Alex Callinicos' article, 'France: anti-capitalist politics in crisis' [[1](#)], he tries to analyse the reasons for the crisis in the French Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA). The third reason he proposes is to blame the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire's (LCR former French section of the Fourth International which dissolved to help form the NPA) version of democratic centralism comparing it unfavourably with that practised by the British SWP.

He argues this as follows:

*"This situation has, then, been exacerbated by a third weakness carried over into the NPA from the LCR, namely an internal regime of institutionalised factionalism. There are, of course, longstanding differences over how best to organise democratic centralism. The SWP has, for more than 40 years, insisted that political disagreements should be allowed to crystallise into formally organised factions only in the period of internal debate before a party conference. The LCR and its sister sections of the FI have, by contrast, long maintained the right to organise permanent tendencies. In the Ligue this meant that internal discussion was for a long period of structured by a permanent debate between a "majority" that was itself a coalition and the grouping around Picquet." International Socialism, Issue 134, March 2012*

Whether he is now having second thoughts in the light of the events surrounding the recent SWP conference we will have to wait and see. But his description of the internal practices of most sections of the FI as 'institutionalised factionalism' requires some examination. Not least because from the outside the internal workings of many small and medium sized left groups (mostly adhering to a form of Leninism or Trotskyism) seem strange and alienating.

The issue at the centre of all this is the relative balance between open and broad discussion – democracy and centralising activity. Although this seems simple, it is not for there is no point in having a long and elaborate debate on a tactic without the agreement to carry out the majority decision – centralism. At different times in different political situations the relative balance between the two may change.

While bourgeois democracy in Britain uses first past the post where the winner takes all, this is not as democratic as the various forms of proportional representation, one of the Chartists' main demands in 1848! Similarly in the broader workers' movement and the Labour Party democracy has always been partial and in the latter was disgracefully undermined after the rise of New Labour.

Compared to these versions the internal functioning in left groups is, on paper, more democratic. 'Democratic Centralism' (DC) is the term used to describe it. This argues that after a period of open debate in the group a vote is taken and all members are then expected to carry out the majority

decision. But of course this covers a multitude of different practices – some openly bureaucratic, others allowing a certain flexibility, others again more libertarian.

Of course the Bolshevik Party, whose leader Lenin developed these ideas, was operating in a police state and this determined how such a policy was carried out. However, even in that situation and before the rise to power of Stalin there was always a multitude of differences and debates going on. But we cannot compare the present period to that of the Russian revolutionaries leading up to 1917. At different times the balance between democracy and centralism will change but at all times, if the revolutionary left is to grow it needs to organise itself in a way that is an improvement on bourgeois democracy.

There is much discussion at present about the events in the British SWP and several current and ex members are citing a lack of democracy as a main reason for the disaster. But this criticism of the interpretation of DC practised by the SWP is not new. Ian Land, an ex member of that group wrote in 1994:

*“It is the contention of this article that the political culture of the SWP is a bureaucratic distortion of Leninism. It should also be clear that the anti-democratic norms of the SWP are no historical accident, but the logical progression of a theory of organisation held by the leadership and unchallenged by the membership. In recent years the shrillness of the SWP leadership’s attacks on any criticism of its methods – from both inside and outside the organisation – has increased, and the cadre of the party has consequently been almost entirely extinguished or demoralised. This is not to suggest that the SWP is on the verge of collapse – it is still a large organisation, capable of interventions in the class struggle that have genuine short-term success. It is, however, to suggest that the SWP is incapable of building or maintaining a cadre; and that, therefore, it is incapable of leading the revolution its members are fighting for.”*

Land argues that Chris Harman and Tony Cliff both misunderstood Lenin’s arguments on the relation of the revolutionary party and the working class. Lenin is quoted as saying:

*“...The proletariat does not recognise unity of action without freedom to discuss and criticise...There can be no mass party, no party of a class, without full clarity of essential shadings, without an open struggle between various tendencies, without informing the masses as to which leaders and which organisations of the party are pursuing this or that line. Without this, a party worthy of the name cannot be built” [2].*

Thus while in periods of repression it might be necessary to stress centralism over democracy, it is important never to ditch democracy altogether. More particularly, in current circumstances (even in Greece where the class struggle is at its highest in Europe), the fullest democracy possible is essential.

Alongside the issue of democracy goes the relation between the elected leadership and other members of the group. Any left group that puts the leadership above criticism from the members will be doomed, for accountability in revolutionary groups must also be an improvement on that of other labour movement bodies. With today’s availability of the internet and social media it is impossible to contain differences inside the group – as the SWP have discovered.

## **Guaranteeing the minority a voice**

Far from ‘institutionalised factionalism’ most sections of the Fourth International have practised a very democratic form of DC. This promotes as much discussion as possible – at all times, not just in a

pre-conference period – in the belief that, while testing out a series of tactics or activities, it is also possible to maintain an ongoing discussion about the continuing relevance or not of such activities. In addition if a tendency or various members do not really agree with any particular tactic they are not expected to lead the organisation's work on it or speak publicly to promote it. Further, although members are expected not to campaign in public against something the group has decided to do, they are not excluded from discussing it with non-members, etc. Furthermore the leadership, the Central or National Committee as well as the Political or Executive Committee includes members of any minority from conference. This is not to institutionalise factionalism, but to learn from those with political differences.

The centralism part of the equation, the decision at a conference or a national committee to support a particular campaign or initiative, has in this process to be tested out to gauge its usefulness or otherwise. All members agree to do this before making a balance sheet of its success or otherwise. But even during this testing out process it is possible for comrades to write critically of what the group is doing, argue their position in branch meetings or at the national committee, for it is in the process of debate and discussion that politics get clarified and developed. At the same time it is educational for all to listen and contribute to such discussions.

While no system is perfect Callinicos' contention of the FI as 'institutionalising factionalism' has not been my experience in over 30 years in the FI. On the contrary my own political education developed very rapidly within the Socialist League (SL) during a period of big differences. During the 1984-5 Miners' strike the tendency I was in, which had been arguing for doing work in the LP during the Bennite revolt, was also pushing for a critique of the way Scargill, under the influence of the CPB, was pursuing the strike at the TUC conference in the Autumn of 1984. Instead of arguing for strike action in solidarity with the Miners, the NUM accepted a promise (never properly carried out) that solidarity levies would be collected from trade union members. Whatever we now think about this particular event, there is no doubt in my mind that my growing understanding of revolutionary politics would have taken years longer if it had not been for the debates and arguments in the Socialist League (previously the IMG) at that time.

It is true, as Callinicos would no doubt argue, that the FI section in Britain at that time was very divided. Three tendencies existed for several years and debates were very fractious, but these represented real political differences. To insist that after conference we should just shut up would have led to an implosion. In the event the SL did implode, but not because of too much democracy – rather the opposite, for in order to maintain the leadership two tendencies blocked together at the conference to deny the third taking over. Each of these three tendencies continuing to exist and the International Group (later the International Socialist Group and now Socialist Resistance) became the FI section.

### **To summarise:**

- The balance between democracy and centralism can change depending on the political situation, but the former is always a necessary part of DC;
- Discussion and debate, including criticism of the group's decisions, is both healthy and educative;
- A leadership should always include minorities which means the debate continues albeit at the same time as the whole group tests out the validity of the majority's position

**Jane Kelly**

---

## **P.S.**

\* From Socialist Resistance, January 17, 2013 6:33 pm:

<http://socialistresistance.org/4552/whose-democratic-centralism>

---

## **Footnotes**

[1] See on ESSF (article 24847), [France: anti-capitalist politics in crisis](#).

[2] <http://www.unkant.com/2012/12/ian-land-swp-vs-lenin.html>