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Organising for 21st century socialism – Reflections on the history and future of Leninism

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The following was presented by Paul Le Blanc to the “Organising for 21st century socialism” seminar in Sydney on June 8, 2013. The seminar was organised by the Socialist Alliance. Le Blanc also addressed meetings in Wollongong, Melbourne and Adelaide. [[1](#)]

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In the first portion of these remarks I want to explain, first of all, why Leninism is worth talking about not only for understanding some of what happened in history, but also for helping change the world in the here-and-now of the early twenty-first century. I want to explain what I mean by the term Leninism, then touch on several historical controversies that may shed light on how to make use of this tradition in our ongoing political work. In the second portion of my remarks, I will offer thoughts on ways to apply and contribute to the Leninist tradition in our practical efforts for the coming period.

Leninism’s meaning and value

In this particular period of radicalisation and ferment, as activists are engaged in sorting through their own experiences, gathering more information about the realities related to those experiences, and engaging with the ideas and examples of revolutionaries who preceded us, a serious engagement with the Leninist tradition will be unavoidable.

That is not because this long-dead revolutionary can tell us all we need to know about building an organisation, a movement, and a set of struggles capable of making a revolution. Lenin and his comrades lived in a very different time, functioned within a political, technological and cultural context that was dramatically different from ours, and also Lenin got important things wrong – making mistakes that, unlike us, he can no longer learn from.

Serious engagement with Leninism is unavoidable for serious activists because Lenin and his comrades developed an incredibly rich body of thought and experience as they faced the oppression and destructiveness and violence of capitalism, and this thought and experience had a powerful impact – for a time – in helping the workers and the oppressed to win important victories. Capitalism continues to exist, the working class continues to exist, various forms of capitalist oppression and destructiveness and violence continue to exist. That is really what the Occupy movement, the Arab spring, the anti-austerity rebellions, and the other insurgencies of our time are all about. So it makes sense to consider what the Leninist tradition may offer.

It has become common among some on the Left to contrast Lenin's own thinking to what has come to be known as "Leninism" – and I want to spend a few minutes on why I don't accept that.

Of course, there is more than one version of "Leninism". In Joseph Stalin's influential 1924 classic, *The Foundations of Leninism*, we are told that "Leninism is Marxism in the era of imperialism and the proletarian revolution". Which means, if you wish to be a genuine Marxist, you cannot question but only embrace Lenin's ideas. This totalistic formulation is worth contrasting with the quite different formulations of three other prominent comrades of Lenin: Nikolai Bukharin, Gregory Zinoviev, and Leon Trotsky. In his valuable biography of Stalin, Robert C. Tucker indicates that Bukharin and Zinoviev refer to Leninism as Lenin's *retrieval* of Marx's revolutionary orientation or his application of Marx's ideas to Russian realities. Trotsky goes so far as to warn that – as Tucker paraphrases it – "a dogmatization of Lenin was contrary to the essentially non-doctrinaire, innovative and critical-minded spirit of Leninism". In contrast, Stalin's "Leninism is Marxism" formulation presents Lenin's thought as the One True Marxism which could not be questioned. His 1924 booklet provides a condensed systematisation that was "catechistic in style and authoritarian in tone", as Tucker aptly notes.

Related to this, it is worth recalling a very fine 1977 essay entitled "Stalin, Lenin and 'Leninism'" by the late Valentino Gerratana (an outstanding scholar who did important work on the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci), who emphasised that "while he was still alive, Lenin was not regarded as a source of authority – even if he possessed considerable personal authority", flowing from the quality of his thought and political practice. The construction of an artificial "Leninism" *as a source of authority* (which could not be questioned and which thereby greatly empowered those claiming to represent it) was carried out most successfully and destructively by Stalin, whose dictatorship destroyed Leninism under the banner of Leninism, to paraphrase what one of his fiercest critics, dissident Communist M. N. Riutin, wrote in the early 1930s. Gerratana reflected:

"The reduction of Lenin's thought to a systematic, concentrated form, and the construction of a finished theoretical system, involved not only the exclusion of everything that was considered accidental to the development of his thought, but also the separation of the end-result from the process that generated it – from the oscillations, approximations, mistakes and corrections essential to the process itself. Moreover, it should be realized that the process remained incomplete, and was cut short at a moment of profound intellectual tension, when Lenin was searching with difficulty for a new way forward. Thus the whole project of his successors [who constructed this artificial "Leninism"] was from the start based on a mystification."

Lenin was influenced by other thinkers. He was very much a part of what Lars Lih has called "the best of Second International Marxism". The so-called "Leninism" of closed, finished dogmas was incompatible with Lenin's entire approach to politics. But it can be argued that he helped generate a distinctive political approach and body of thought – for the sake of brevity one could refer to a genuine Leninism – to which it is worth giving attention.

Lenin's quite unoriginal starting-point (shared with Karl Marx, Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, and

others) is a belief in the necessary interconnection of socialist theory and practice with the working class and labour movement. The working class cannot adequately defend its actual interests and overcome its oppression, in his view, without embracing the goal of socialism – an economic system in which the economy is socially owned and democratically controlled in order to meet the needs of all people.

This fundamental orientation is the basis for most of what Lenin has to say, which taken together constitutes the “Leninism” of Lenin. The scope of his political thought is something I attempted to convey in my collection of his writings entitled *Revolution, Democracy, Socialism*. It embraces various aspects of the labour movement: class-consciousness and culture, trade unions, social movements for reforms, the relationship of reform to revolution, electoral struggles, dynamics of party-building, united front coalitions, class alliances (especially the worker-peasant alliance), the interplay of democratic and socialist struggles, questions of nationalism and imperialism, ways of utilising Marxist theory, and more.

At certain points, Lenin’s utilisation of Marxism was different from some of what passed for Marxism among a majority of the world’s socialists by 1919, when the Communist International was formed. What distinguished Lenin’s Bolsheviks from many others is a refusal to make certain compromises, either with capitalist politicians or labour bureaucracies, and a determination to follow through to the end the implications of the revolutionary Marxist orientation as expressed in Lenin’s writings. This suggests that there was a decisive element of difference, when all was said and done, between the kind of party that Kautsky was a member of in Germany (the Social-Democratic Party) and the kind of party that Lenin and his comrades were actually building in Russia. At the same time, as Neil Harding, Lars Lih, August Nimtz, and others have emphasised, Lenin’s thought can most fruitfully be understood in continuity with that of Marx. As the German reformist-socialist Eduard Bernstein once said to philosopher Sidney Hook: “Do you know? Marx had a strong Bolshevik streak!”

Another key point is that Lenin’s ideas and practical political efforts cannot adequately be comprehended outside of the context of his comrades and co-thinkers. It goes against the grain of Lenin’s own method, and against what actually happened in history, to present Lenin not as one among a diverse collection of capable comrades, but as the one authoritative representative of True Marxism. While one can make a strong case that Lenin was the first among equals, it is quite simply wrong to be dismissive of his comrades as a collection of “yes-men” and “yes-women” or as an inadequate bunch who never measured-up. A problem of many of us in the Trotskyist tradition is a tendency to view other prominent Bolsheviks simply as bunglers – they got it wrong, they misunderstood, they failed to remain true to the brilliance of their would-be mentor.

To think that a revolution can really be understood in that way, and to think that an effective revolutionary organisation can be built according to such a model, is highly problematical.

Two of the favourite whipping-boys for those wishing to elevate Lenin above his followers are Gregory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev. Lars Lih has the distinction of being in the vanguard of those inclined to push back against the dismissal of these two close comrades of Lenin. His defense of Zinoviev is presented in a volume edited with Ben Lewis, *Zinoviev and Martov: Head to Head in Halle*, where (hardly uncritical of Zinoviev) he says: “Two comments by [prominent Bolshevik Anatoly] Lunacharsky seem to me to hit the right note: he called Zinoviev “a person who had a profound understanding of the essence of Bolshevism” and one who was “romantically” devoted to the party. Lars added that Zinoviev was “someone who was under the spell of the Leninist drama of [proletarian] hegemony, but with a decidedly populist bent”. This is not to suggest that Zinoviev was free from serious faults, some of which have been highlighted by revolutionaries who worked with him – Alfred Rosmer, Victor Serge, Angelica Balabanoff, and others – but he himself was a revolutionary who was more than simply the sum of his faults.

Lars has also taken up the cudgels on behalf of Lev Kamenev, the target of Lenin's critique of a presumably ossified "Old Bolshevism" in 1917. A couple of years back, he offered another of his provocative essays, "The Ironic Triumph of Old Bolshevism: The Debates of April 1917 in Context", in the journal *Russian History*. Lars challenges the standard account of Lenin reorienting the Bolshevik party in preparation for the October Revolution, writing that "Kamenev seems to think he won the debate with Lenin in April 1917", and Lars suggests that Kamenev was right. One need not agree with this reinterpretation of the April 1917 debate in order to appreciate his positive contribution.

I am more drawn to the interpretations of Lenin provided in the memoirs of an eye-witness, Lenin's close comrade and devoted companion Nadezhda Krupskaya, a shrewd revolutionary in her own right. In her *Reminiscences of Lenin*, Krupskaya quotes Lenin to indicate his outlook in early 1917: "Without a doubt, this coming revolution can only be a proletarian revolution, and in an even more profound sense of the word: a proletarian socialist revolution. This coming revolution will show in an even greater degree on the one hand, that only grim battles, only civil wars, can free humanity from the yoke of capital; on the other hand, that only class-conscious proletarians can and will give leadership to the vast majority of the exploited".

Krupskaya described the presentation of the *April Theses* this way: "Lenin expounded his views as to what had to be done in a number of theses. In these theses he weighed the situation, and clearly set forth the aims that had to be striven for and the ways that had to be followed to attain them. The comrades were somewhat taken aback for the moment. Many of them thought that Ilyich was presenting the case in much too blunt a manner, and that it was too early yet to speak of a socialist revolution". She notes that Lenin's theses were published in the Bolshevik paper *Pravda*, followed by a polemic from Kamenev "in which he dissociated himself from these theses. Kamenev's article stated that they were the expression of Lenin's personal views, which neither *Pravda* nor the Bureau of the Central Committee shared. It was not these theses of Lenin's that the Bolshevik delegates had accepted, but those of the Central Committee Bureau, Kamenev alleged".

Krupskaya concluded: "A struggle started within the Bolshevik organization. It did not last long." Within a week, Lenin's position was upheld by the Bolshevik majority. This account is similar to what one finds in the accounts of other eyewitnesses - the Mensheviks Nikolai Sukhanov and Raphael Abramovitch, the Menshevik-turned-Bolshevik Alexandra Kollontai, and the Bolshevik-turned-Menshevik W.S. Woytinsky.

There are three extremely important facts that emerge, however, in Lars Lih's account. First of all, Lenin did not feel bound by some rigid notion of "democratic centralism" to refrain from expressing his own views if they happened to be in contradiction to those of the formal leadership of the revolutionary party to which he belonged. For Lenin, revolutionary principles always trump organisational harmony, and this was an element essential to his conception of democratic centralism and revolutionary organisation.

Second, an open debate between comrades in the pages of the party newspaper was by no means alien to the Leninism of the early Bolsheviks. In a recent article Lars quotes from a 1925 history of the Bolshevik party written by a veteran Bolshevik organiser, Vladimir Nevsky, who tells us that democratic centralism represented "complete democracy", explaining that in 1917 "the organization of the Bolsheviks lived fully the life of a genuine proletarian democratic organization", with "free discussion, a lively exchange of opinions", taking place in "the absence of any bureaucratic attitude to getting things done - in a word, the active participation of emphatically all members in the affairs of the organization".

Third is that the "Old Bolshevism" that Kamenev defended had been a collectively-developed

orientation, the common position of Lenin and the Bolshevik comrades with whom he now disagreed. Both the Bolshevik and Menshevik wings of Russian socialism had seen Russia's revolution as "bourgeois-democratic" – preliminary to the future transition to socialism. But in 1917 no less than before, the politics of all Bolsheviks was grounded in a militantly class-struggle orientation distinct from the worker-capitalist alliance position of the Mensheviks, projecting an uncompromising worker-peasant alliance. This common ground between "Old Bolshevism" and the *April Theses*, rooted in the collectively-developed politics over a period of years (not the blinding revolutionary authority of the Unquestioned Leader), is what made it relatively easy for Lenin to win the debate so quickly in 1917.

Communist International

There is another aspect of Leninism, often raised as a truly negative feature to be avoided by serious activists of today. That is the extreme, intolerant sectarianism purported to be at the very heart of the Communist International that Lenin and his comrades established, of which Gregory Zinoviev was the president from 1919 to 1926. Sometimes critics of the form Leninism took in this period denounce it as "Zinovievism". Some of what is being denounced, however, can more fairly be laid at Lenin's door – in particular the "Twenty-one conditions" for affiliation to the Communist International.

Adopted at the 1920 Second Congress of the Comintern, this document began with an important explanation. The initial popularity of the Russian Revolution and the Communist International, among radicalising workers of various countries, attracted some parties that were not actually in agreement with the revolutionary Marxist program of the new International, particularly some still led by reformist or semi-reformist leaders closely associated with the Second International. This meant that the Comintern "is in danger of being diluted by vacillating and irresolute groups that have not yet broken from the ideology of the Second International". This ideology had led to a general capitulation to the imperialist slaughter of World War I and the suppression of revolutionaries within the various organisations.

The incredibly strict conditions designed to prevent the possibility of such reformist dilution explicitly excluded any consideration of membership in the Comintern for well-known reformist-socialists, insisting that Communist principles and organisational perspectives be strictly adhered to, with no organisational ties to the parties and trade unions associated with the Second International being permitted.

This is utilised by some critics to dismiss Lenin and the Comintern as authoritarian and destructive. Such an a-historical approach, however, not only ignores the historically specific context that caused the adoption of the "Twenty-one conditions" but urges us to dismiss the efforts of countless revolutionaries who made the early Communist International a living reality. A serious examination of the immense, multi-volume work on that entity by John Riddell and his colleagues – which includes considerable contributions on overcoming sectarianism, building united fronts, etc. – suggests the shallowness of such an approach.

This is not to insist that all aspects of the twenty-one conditions must be accepted or that any of them are beyond criticism. In order to begin a serious critique, however, it also makes sense to take seriously the reasons given for their adoption – reasons which at that particular moment in history may have had greater validity than some critics allow.

This brings us to a final point. We are incredibly far from the specific realities of the Communist International or of the Socialist International or even of Karl Marx's International Workingmen's

Association. In some ways we are far ahead of any of these – but in very important ways, socialists from these first three workers’ internationals were far in advance of us. There is much to learn from the Leninist tradition. But one must use it critically and creatively for it to make sense in our own particular context and time period. That happens to be central to the method of Lenin.

Internationalism in our own time

I will now turn, in the second half of my remarks, to thoughts on how we can be utilising and contributing to the Leninist tradition as we struggle for socialism in the twenty-first century.

I gave a presentation in London last year on my thoughts regarding what I think it will take to engage fruitfully in the process of building a revolutionary party in the United States. What I said then still makes sense to me, but one of the comrades there made an excellent criticism. My comments involved an immersion in the specific realities in the United States – and I still think that what we do must be grounded in the local actualities and national specifics that we are part of. But she pointed out that the international dimension was largely missing, and I had to agree with her that this was a serious weakness. There were references to opposing war and imperialism, but that was about it.

For serious Marxists, however, internationalism has always involved more than that – and it has also involved much more than simply rhetorical solidarity with the struggles of workers and oppressed of all lands. It especially means grounding our nationally-specific politics in an understanding of what is happening with capitalism as a global system, and in creative interaction with sisters and brothers fighting against oppression and for economic justice throughout the world. Struggles, gains and setbacks in one place impact on struggles in other places. Important lessons learned here can provide incredibly useful lessons elsewhere. Experiences of those who struggle in other lands can not only inspire us, but provide invaluable insights about what we might do next in our own contexts. This was true in the time of Lenin, as reflected, for example, in the amazing multi-volume retrieval of material on the early Communist International that John Riddell and his co-workers have been making available to us. If anything, it is even more true in our much-vaunted age of globalisation, in which working-class organising and solidarity across borders will undoubtedly provide the key to winning strategies in both our short-term and long-term efforts to push back capitalist tyranny, and finally to end it.

Australian revolutionaries have been making cutting-edge contributions to the development of such internationalism, through conferences like this, and especially through the outstanding service provided online with *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal*. The World Social Forum, at least in its earlier years, was also part of this global radicalisation process. Vital contributions have also come from the dramatic proliferation of world-wide information sharing and communication through the internet. Serious revolutionary groups in all countries, it seems to me, need to find ways to advance such virtual and face-to-face engagement, to strengthen the cooperative process of advancing our interrelated liberation struggles. Revolutionary internationalism must be more than a slogan, it should involve a collaboration and activities that are central to our efforts.

From small groups to mass parties

Many revolutionaries are faced with the challenge of how small socialist groups can give way to mass socialist parties and movements. A number of us have concluded that it is a fatal mistake for a small group to see itself as the nucleus or the embryo of a mass revolutionary party. Such a party will, in fact, be made up though the coming together of elements from a number of groups, as well

as a number of people not presently in any group, and even more who do not presently think of themselves as socialists at all. It will crystallise through innumerable experiences and struggles, blending together with a broad labour-radical subculture of ideas, discussions, and creative activities. The creation of a genuine revolutionary party consistent with Lenin's own orientation can only come about on the basis of a substantial portion of a broad, class-conscious, vanguard layer of the working class. One of our primary jobs, as revolutionary socialists, is to do all that we can – through mass struggles, through socialist education, through working with others – to contribute to the crystallisation of such a vanguard layer, a layer that will be the basis for a mass revolutionary party.

It is obviously important for existing small groups of socialists to work together, as much as they can, to advance this process – a process that will cause them to go out of existence by merging into the larger revolutionary party-to-be. Sometimes there is such a substantial overlap in the basic principles of the different groups that it makes sense for them to become a single, larger group as they work to help create the preconditions for a genuine mass revolutionary party. Sometimes, there are obstacles that make such fusions unlikely or impossible – there may be fundamental disagreements around the process or desirability of creating a mass revolutionary party, there may be fundamental disagreements on how to relate to capitalist political forces, there may be fundamental disagreements around the relation of democracy to socialism. Such fundamental disagreements might mean that organisational unity is not in the cards – but there could still be the basis for, and the desirability of, what Lenin once called “fighting unity” and what are sometimes referred to as united fronts.

In the midst of the 1905 revolutionary upsurge in Russia, Lenin argued against a call for all the different revolutionary groups to submerge their differences and unite in a single group. “In the interests of the revolution”, he wrote, “our ideal should by no means be that all parties, all trends and all shades of opinion fuse in a revolutionary chaos”. He referred to other “hasty and half-baked experiments” in such unity, seeking to “lump together the most heterogeneous elements” which achieved little more than “mutual friction and bitter disappointment”. On the other hand, if diverse groups focus on how to advance a specific struggle around democratic rights or economic justice – agreeing to disagree on points of difference while cooperating to achieve a meaningful immediate aim – much can be achieved. As long as fundamental differences exist, Lenin insisted, “we shall inevitably have to march separately, but we can strike together more than once, and particularly now” amid the revolutionary insurgency. History also shows us that, to the extent that practical experience eliminates fundamental differences, it becomes possible for different forces to come together into a single organisation, with very positive results. This was the case at certain points in revolutionary Russia and in many other instances.

It appears that circumstances in Australia today may be contributing to some groups going beyond simply a “fighting unity” toward the achievement of an organisational unity that could greatly strengthen the efforts of revolutionary socialists. This experience is very exciting, and it is being watched and will provide invaluable lessons for revolutionaries in other countries.

Principled flexibility

Related to this, it is worth noting another essential element in Lenin's methodology – the way he combined an insistence on the clarity of basic principles (those of revolutionary Marxism) with what might be called a principled flexibility. A number of people, including severe critics among the Mensheviks who knew him well, were struck by his extreme disinclination to make a show of his own knowledge, and by his deep desire to learn from others – especially fellow revolutionary activists,

workers, peasants. He understood that one must be able to listen and learn from those one wishes to teach, and that the development of knowledge is interactive and collective. He even learned from political opponents – the British liberal J.A. Hobson powerfully influenced his book *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, anarchists influenced his classic *The State and Revolution*, the populists of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party influenced him enough to cause him to steal their agrarian program of land to the peasants, and during the revolutionary upsurge of 1905 he scolded some Bolshevik comrades who were more drawn to revolutionary rhetoric than to practical workers' struggles, saying: "Take a lesson from the Mensheviks, for Christ sake!"

In more than one way, Lenin's theoretical approach was not a closed system but rather what can be called an open Marxism. He called it a guide to action, emphasising that reality is always much more complex, vibrant, and multi-coloured than theory can ever be, and that theory must continually be developed and renewed through the engagement with actual political struggle and experience. That is the kind of Marxism we need in order to comprehend the rapidly evolving capitalism of our time, and the multi-faceted and fluid realities of working-class life and experience. This involves the dramatic shifts and fluctuations in regard to working-class occupations and the labour process, and the proletarianisation of large swathes of the labour force not traditionally perceived as "working class". It also involves the interplay of class with ethnicity, race, gender, religion, culture, and more. Lenin's approach helps to orient us to the amazing dynamics of globalisation, and to understand that issues often perceived as "identity politics" are inseparable from class politics. This comes through in the famous passage in *What Is To Be Done?* which is worth reminding ourselves of again and again:

*"The Social-Democrat's ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but **the tribune of the people**, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth **before all** his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify for **all** and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat."*

This remains as true now as it was a hundred years ago.

The centrality of democracy

It also dovetails with the centrality of democracy to the working-class struggle for socialism that Lenin was emphasising two years before the Bolshevik Revolution. It is also worth quoting at length, because it helps to define what we must be doing today in the struggle for socialism in our own century:

*"The proletariat cannot be victorious except through democracy, i.e., by giving full effect to democracy and by linking with each step of its struggle democratic demands formulated in the most resolute terms. . . . We must **combine** the revolutionary struggle against capitalism with a revolutionary programme and tactics on all democratic demands: a republic, a militia, the popular election of officials, equal rights for women, the self-determination of nations, etc. While capitalism exists, these demands—all of them—can only be accomplished as an exception, and even then in an incomplete and distorted form. Basing ourselves on the democracy already achieved, and exposing its incompleteness under capitalism, we demand the overthrow of capitalism, the expropriation of the bourgeoisie, as a necessary basis both for the abolition of the poverty of the masses and for the **complete** and **all-round** institution of **all** democratic reforms. Some of these reforms will be started*

*before the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, others **in the course** of that overthrow, and still others after it. The social revolution is not a single battle, but a period covering a series of battles over all sorts of problems of economic and democratic reform, which are consummated only by the expropriation of the bourgeoisie. It is for the sake of this final aim that we must formulate **every one** of our democratic demands in a consistently revolutionary way. It is quite conceivable that the workers of some particular country will overthrow the bourgeoisie **before** even a single fundamental democratic reform has been fully achieved. It is, however, quite inconceivable that the proletariat, as a historical class, will be able to defeat the bourgeoisie, unless it is prepared for that by being educated in the spirit of the most consistent and resolutely revolutionary democracy.”*

The centrality of democracy in the struggle for socialism applies not only in the social and political struggles within society, but also in the internal structure and practice of the socialist organisation itself. In my book *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* and in other places, I have written a great deal on the actual meaning and practice of the concept of “democratic centralism” – what Lenin defined as full freedom of discussion and unity in action, and others have written about that as well. It has been documented that the Bolshevik organisation had a considerable degree of internal democracy. We have already noted here how this changed dramatically under the rule of Joseph Stalin. That was a disastrous development largely rooted in the devastation and isolation of Soviet Russia in the midst of the civil war years, combined with the extreme economic backwardness and poverty of the Russian economy. This resulted in what were supposed to be emergency measures that, in fact, became permanent – which eliminated any genuine democracy in the Soviet Union, and also eliminated genuine internal democracy in all Communist parties controlled by the Stalin leadership.

Internal culture and cadre development

What we have found even among all-too-many anti-Stalinist organisations committed to revolutionary socialism are – in the name of Leninism and “democratic centralism” – practices that cut across the possibility of the kind of internal democracy that seems to have existed, historically, in Lenin’s organisation. Such internal democracy is one feature that made it possible for the Bolsheviks to be the kind of revolutionary force that triumphed in 1917. One of the reasons for the disappointing absence of that kind of democracy in many relatively small socialist groups in later years may have to do with a flaw in their self-conception. Some function more or less as sects, creating their own political universe that involves a self-conception that they constitute the “revolutionary vanguard” (or the politically correct nucleus around which a vanguard must form). The hope for the future is often seen as preserving the authority and ideological purity of one’s precious organisation. This can engender ideological and organisational rigidities which distort the way that democratic centralism (particularly “full freedom of discussion”) might be understood and practiced.

If our self-conception is that we do not yet have a revolutionary party (not even in embryo), and that our purpose is to help create the preconditions that might make the emergence of such a party possible, this could encourage a different kind of internal practice, in some ways matching the way we would be dealing with those outside of our group. A primary goal would be to generate more and more thought, experience, and creativity among one’s comrades and others, as activists are working together in order to bring into being a force that can successfully challenge capitalism. There are indications, in fact, that such an extended pre-party process – even in underground conditions – existed through the 1890s and early 1900s among Marxist-oriented revolutionaries, creating a subculture which nurtured a genuine internal democracy as the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (and its Bolshevik faction) finally took shape.

One of the revolutionaries in-the-making from that time, Eugenia Levitskaya, later reminisced: "Turning over in my mind the mass of comrades with whom I had occasion to meet, I cannot recall a single reprehensible, contemptible act, a single deception or lie. There was friction. There were factional differences of opinion. But no more than that. Somehow everyone looked after himself morally, became better and more gentle in that friendly family". (This sense of things can be found in a different context many years later, when the veteran revolutionary James P. Cannon commented: "The true art of being a socialist consists in anticipating the socialist future; in not waiting for its actual realization, but in striving here and now, insofar as the circumstances of class society permit, to live like a socialist; to live under capitalism according to the higher standards of a socialist future".)

A vibrant elaboration of this comradely subculture among Russian revolutionaries comes through in Maxim Gorky's novel of 1906, entitled *Mother*. A central figure in this subculture, Lenin wrote in *What Is To Be Done?* about the organisational ideal of 1902 as "a close and compact body of comrades in which complete, mutual confidence prevails". Even amid the fierce polemical controversies among the Russian Communists in 1920, Lenin quoted Trotsky - with whom he was then in sharp disagreement - that "ideological struggle within the Party does not mean mutual ostracism but mutual influence".

One of the most important elements in this subculture, I think, should be an inclusiveness that persistently and insistently works to overcome, in the revolutionary organisation, the divisive oppressions of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other destructive dynamics blighting human relationships in the larger society. At times this may generate painful tensions and conflicts. Scrupulously democratic process, combined with considerable thoughtfulness and sensitivity, will be needed to help maintain balance and cohesion as the organisation works frankly and seriously toward fruitful results.

Such a general subculture contributes to the realisation of a primary task for any revolutionary organisation worth its salt - the development of durable cadres. By this term cadre I am referring to experienced activists, educated in political theory, analytically oriented, with practical organisational skills, who are able to attract new and train new members of the revolutionary organisation, and also to contribute to expanding efforts in broader movements for social change. This means knowing something of the history of the class struggle and of broad liberation struggles, knowing the economic and political realities of society, knowing how to size up a situation, knowing how to interact with others to help communicate that knowledge to them, knowing how to organise meetings and political actions. Such qualities need to be developed among increasing numbers of people. The proliferation of such durable cadres is essential for all the life-giving struggles leading up to the possibility of socialist revolution.

Taking power to bring about socialism

Lenin's thought, as Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács emphasised nine decades back, was infused by a sense of "the actuality of revolution", which would be essential in establishing (as Lukács put it) "firm guide-lines for all questions on the daily agenda, whether they were political or economic, involved theory or tactics, agitation or organization". That is to say, Lenin was concerned in all of his political thinking and activity with the question of what it would take - actually - to take power. Not rhetorically or theoretically, but in fact, and then to do exactly that.

Our purpose - as revolutionary socialists - is not simply to persuade people that socialism could be so much better than capitalism. Our purpose is not simply to protest, and organise protests, against

capitalist injustice. Our purpose is not simply to organise struggles to bring about improvements under capitalism. Our purpose is not simply to interpret history and current events (or anything else) from a revolutionary socialist standpoint. Instead, our primary purpose is to overturn existing power relationships, and to put political power into the hands of an organised, class-conscious working class that is determined to establish a socialist democracy. Everything else we do politically must be geared to realising that primary purpose.

I want to conclude with two additional notions on what may need to be done by a revolutionary party that actually intends to implement the revolutionary-democratic approach for bringing about socialism that we saw Lenin laying out in the long quotation about democratic struggles offered a few minutes ago in this presentation. One notion has to do with ways that practical struggles in the here-and-now can be integrated into a strategy for the working class to take power. The other notion involves defining a bit more specifically what the socialism we are struggling for would actually look like, in order to help guide the practical struggles of today and tomorrow.

The “Old Bolshevik” strategic orientation that Lenin developed with his comrades involved the notion that a worker-peasant alliance would bring about the democratic revolution that would overthrow monarchist oppression and clear the way for an effective struggle for socialism. This was popularised into political agitation and mobilisation around three demands: (1) an eight-hour workday for workers, (2) land redistribution for the peasants, and (3) a constituent assembly to establish a democratic republic. These came to be known as “the three whales of Bolshevism” – based on the popular Russian folktale that the world is balanced on the backs of three whales.

What are the “three whales” of your own revolutionary perspective in Australia and ours in the United States? What is the strategic orientation that could bring the working-class to power in society today, and how can this be expressed in popular and practical struggles in the here-and-now, in a way that can capture the imaginations of masses of people? Finding answers to such questions is a challenge facing revolutionary socialists of each and every country in the twenty-first century.

Other guide-lines for the practical struggles of today and tomorrow need to be provided by the question of what the socialism we are struggling for would actually look like. It has become a tradition for Marxists to scoff, proudly and indignantly, that we cannot provide “utopian blueprints” of the future society, and there is validity to this. But it seems to me that present-day realities are eroding that validity.

For decades we have been treated to the spectacle of parties claiming to be socialist coming to power (or at least being voted into office) and then – in contradiction to their stated goals – carrying out so-called “realistic” policies designed to salvage and maintain one or another version of actually-existing capitalism. In some cases this is combined with implementing welfare-state social reforms, in other cases it is combined with slashing previously implemented welfare-state reforms. Do we intend to do better than that? If so, we need to figure out how, and be able explain that to those whose mass support will be needed to make it so.

If there is an alternative to the present impasse of capitalism, and to capitalism itself, we need to be able to say – quite specifically – what that would look like and, with at least some key specifics, how it would be done. It would involve a society free from poverty and unemployment, with decent education and health care and housing for all, with a secure economic infrastructure (including mass transit systems), and the elimination of air and water pollution, and of the destructive use of our natural resources. It would involve liberty and justice for all, with the free development of each person being the condition for the free development of all. This would involve an economic democracy, to ensure that society’s economic resources would be utilised to make these proposed changes a reality.

Such things can be explained in ways that highlight how they can actually be carried out, based on real-world specifics. This can, in turn, provide the basis for immediate struggles – struggles whose beginning is in our present-day capitalist society, but whose end will take us beyond that framework to the future of genuine democracy and freedom. The socialism that we want can be embedded in the struggles of today and the victories of tomorrow. Some may see this approach as being somewhat akin to Leon Trotsky’s “Transitional Program”, although in the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels seem to have sketched a similar approach, suggesting:

“in the beginning, this cannot be effected except by means of despotic inroads on the rights of property, and on the conditions of bourgeois production; by means of measures, therefore, which appear economically insufficient and untenable, but which, in the course of the movement, outstrip themselves, necessitate further inroads upon the old social order, and are unavoidable as a means of entirely revolutionizing the mode of production.”

The challenge for us is to get increasingly specific and practical about the socialist alternative to capitalism, building organisations and movements that can develop mass consciousness and mass struggles capable of bringing about that alternative. That’s the point of what we’re doing – the actuality of revolution, the culmination of what so many of us, so many of our brothers and sisters, have been struggling for over so many years, a socialist future to be created in the twenty-first century.

Paul Le Blanc

P.S.

* <http://links.org.au/node/3394>

Footnotes

[1] A video of the presentation can be viewed at <http://links.org.au/node/3396>.