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Weighing the legacy of Lenin's Comintern - In reply to Paul Kellogg's review of 'Toward the United Front'

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Paul Kellogg's review [1] in *Socialist Studies* of my edition of the Communist International's 1922 world congress raises two probing questions regarding the legacy of the Communist International (Comintern) in Lenin's time. [2] First, he questions a long-held conception that the Bolshevik leaders initiated all the Comintern's major steps in policy development. Second, he challenges the belief that the Lenin-era International represents a model or template for program and strategy in our time.

Kellogg, an experienced and respected Marxist activist based in Canada, is right on the first point. On the second, he takes a correct initial step but needs to engage with the substance of the Comintern's strategic heritage.

Kellogg's essay ranges far and wide. Much of it deals with the character of the October 1917 Russian revolution and the soviet government it created. The topics covered include the Polish-Russian war of 1920, the role of anti-Semitism in Soviet Russia, the Russian upheaval's relationship to earlier bourgeois revolutions in Britain and France, and more. These questions require separate analysis. In this working paper, I will address instead the two questions related to Kellogg's initial focus, the Comintern's Fourth Congress.

Pressure from the front lines

In Kellogg's view, most historians of the Communist International have exaggerated the wisdom of Russian leaders during its early years, those shaped by Lenin and his policies. The frequent counterposition of the "experienced Russian leadership of the Comintern and the inexperienced mistake-prone leadership of the non-Russians" is "too angular" and thus misleading, he says.

The record of the Fourth Congress, Kellogg says, "reveals key moments where the Comintern leadership, including its core Russian section, was quite wrong." I agree entirely, and the

introduction to my volume, from which Kellogg quotes (p. 185), assembles evidence to this effect. [3] However, I would add three qualifications:

1. The predominance of Bolshevik leaders in determining the Comintern's course was more marked up to its Second Congress (1920), a period concerned with developing basic program. It is less pronounced thereafter, as the Comintern's parties gained mass support, developed strategic vision, and entered into action. The balance shifted back again at the end of 1923, which was also the close of the period dominated by Lenin and his policies.
2. During 1920-1923, it was not only the Comintern's best insights that were often initiated by its front-line parties but also some of its most damaging errors.
3. In all these cases, both good and bad, the role of front-line parties was shaped not just by central leaders but by pressure from the ranks of the parties and the working class.

These factors are visible in the way the Fourth Congress dealt with the rise of Fascism in Italy. Members of the Comintern Executive initially adapted to the ultraleft course of the Italian Communist Party, and then, without explanation, reversed its course at the close of the congress, too late for the new approach to be recorded in congress resolutions. The impulse for this turnabout appears to have come from supporters of united-front policy in Germany and nearby countries, who were up against the growing menace of local fascist movements. [4]

Not doctrine but history

Kellogg agrees with British historian Ian Birchall that the decisions of the Comintern congresses in Lenin's time - its first four congresses - can no longer be considered as the foundation for revolutionary socialist policy. Kellogg quotes Birchall's statement that this claim is now made only "in the remoter reaches of the Trotskyist blogosphere." [5] Kellogg adds that the first four congresses, in the words of Abigail Bakan, "need to be approached not as textbooks but rather as history books."

I agree. At a Toronto meeting on February 3, 2013, celebrating the publication of *Toward the United Front*, my edition of the fourth Comintern congress, I rejected the "textbook" conception and described the book's purpose as the recovery of revolutionary memory. I explained this goal as follows:

"Why is this memory important to revolutionaries? Revolutionary memory provides the language we use in projecting a social alternative. Memory is the map of our imagination. It is the factual basis for developing and testing policy. As best we can, we try to pass on and, where necessary, rediscover this memory and make it available for a new generation to weigh and assess. My work aimed to do this for a small but significant fragment of our heritage." [6]

This alternative to the "textbook" approach applies not only to the Comintern but to Marx and Engels, Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin, and other major contributors to the Marxist heritage.

What, then, was the claim regarding the congresses of Lenin's Comintern made by Marxist continuators of its heritage, including myself, during the twentieth century? Kellogg focuses on the opinion of Duncan Hallas, a leader of the British Socialist Workers Party until the mid-1990s, who published an outstanding short history of the Comintern in 1985. Hallas wrote:

"Naturally it is possible to point to blunders... But on the main issues, on the central thrust of its

political line, the Comintern leadership was right and all its opponents, in their different ways, were wrong. That is precisely why the heritage of the first four congresses, in principles, in strategy, and in tactics, is so indispensable to revolutionary socialists today.” [7]

But this assertion must be examined more closely.

Hesitations on the united front

Despite his sweeping claim, Hallas acknowledges many errors by the early Comintern, including in its dealings with centrists in Italy and its trade union policy. A close reading of his text reveals other criticisms that bear on the very policies that Hallas highlights as central to the Comintern’s legacy: those relating to workers’ unity in action (the “united front”).

a. National liberation struggles

The Comintern’s Second Congress in 1920 agreed, on Lenin’s proposal, to support “bourgeois liberation movements” in colonial and semi-colonial countries provided they are “genuinely revolutionary.” (The term “bourgeois” referred here not to class composition but chiefly to a program that did not go beyond the limits of a bourgeois [capitalist] order.) Hallas dismisses this position on the grounds that a “bourgeois liberation movement” necessarily fears arousing the masses and is therefore not genuinely revolutionary (p. 50-51).

The objection is not small, given the role of national liberation in revolutionary struggles throughout the twentieth century and into the new millennium, as for example in Venezuela. Many Marxist currents share Hallas’s viewpoint, and their aversion to the Comintern’s position on nationalism has a major impact on practical policy.

At its 1922 Fourth Congress, the Comintern elaborated its 1920 position into a call for anti-imperialist united fronts. This concept is absent from Hallas’s text.

b. United fronts

The Comintern’s united front policy, adopted at the end of 1921, aimed to enable workers with counterposed political outlooks and allegiances to come together in common action. The policy integrates what the Comintern considered two complementary goals: (1) the workers’ urgent need to unite against the class enemy; (2) the Communist movement’s need to win with the confidence of a majority of workers through its leadership role in mass actions.

Hallas provides a lengthy quotation from Leon Trotsky that makes both these points. [8] Hallas’s own exposition, however, focuses one-sidedly on how the united front builds the revolutionary party. It is “a method of struggle for influence and support”; “a tactic intended to win ... workers’ support for revolutionary organizations.” He also restricts its applicability to “defensive situations” and “working-class struggles” (p. 67-70).

Such a restrictive understanding of united fronts is all the more questionable today, when the concept is applied by groups with only a few thousand, a few hundred, or a few dozen members, locked in rivalry with other revolutionary currents.

c. Transitional demands

The concept of “transitional demands” was developed in the postwar German workers’ movement to designate demands that could help workers, as they radicalized, to see the need to break from

bourgeois influence and set out on the road to power. Examples from the Comintern era include the call for workers' control of production and abolition of bank and commercial secrets. An example from our era is the call for radical cuts in greenhouse gas emissions, carried out under popular control.

The Fourth Congress decided, on the insistence of German leaders and over objections by Nikolai Bukharin, to include transitional demands in the Comintern's program.

The concept of transitional demands is completely absent from Hallas's book.

d. Workers' governments

As Hallas records, the Fourth Congress stated that Communists were "ready, in certain circumstances and with certain guarantees, to support a workers' government that is not Communist" - adding that such a government might include Communist participation. The congress resolution specified that such a regime, even if it was "parliamentary in origin," is possible "only if it is born from the struggles of the masses themselves."

In Hallas's view, "the thing is clearly wrong in principle." Further, "the slogan of the workers' government inevitably shifted the emphasis to questions of parliamentary majorities" (pp. 74-76). The implication, although Hallas does not spell it out, is that the only government that revolutionary socialists can conceivably support is a purely "Communist" government established by an insurrectionary upsurge.

Sweeping objections

The four policies summarized here meshed together as part of a unified Comintern strategy leading toward workers' power in a period when socialist revolution was not immediately possible. They were all adopted by the Comintern in 1921-22, as the postwar revolutionary upsurge receded and it seemed unlikely that workers could take power in key European countries, as had previously been hoped, within a few months. The united front policy, with all its interlinked components, is at the very centre of the revolutionary strategy of Lenin's Comintern. [9]

It would appear to be the segment of the Comintern's strategic legacy that would be most relevant to our times. Instead, Hallas regards it with many reservations.

Clearly, Hallas's objections to the policies of Lenin's Comintern concern not blunders and secondary issues but "the central thrust of its political line." Marxists of many currents today view some or all of these Comintern policies, to varying degrees, as conducive to reformism. Such concerns deserve to be taken seriously and fraternally discussed.

The problem is not Hallas's opinions as such, but the incorporation of an interpretation of early Comintern decisions and other elements of working-class history into the collective doctrine of Marxist currents. For their members and supporters, this converts the Comintern, along with other important historical topics, into a no-go area, where independent inquiry and debate are discouraged.

Today, many Marxists agree with Birchall and Kellogg in repudiating a "textbook" concept of the early Comintern record. Let us hope that they will not walk away from this experience but rather enter the previously forbidden garden and tell us if it contains anything of continuing value.

Roots of the March 1921 defeat

Kellogg, for his part, points to two major errors of the Communist movement in Lenin's time, the ultraleftist March Action fiasco launched by the German Communist Party in 1921 and the invasion of Poland by the Soviet Red Army following a Polish attack on Soviet Ukraine the previous year.

In the March Action, the German Communist party, with strong encouragement from Comintern envoys in Berlin, attempted a general strike with little or no support outside their ranks, and failed to mobilize even half its membership. The strike's failure was a severe setback for the party, from which, in the opinion of some historians, it never recovered.

Kellogg says the error "was not a minor, accidental one - but one which exposed crucial flaws in Lenin's and the Bolsheviks' very conception of revolution," a conception that carried over into the Comintern. "It is a classic example of the problem of substitutionism - bypassing the mass self-emancipation of the working class, and attempting to substitute for it the actions of a minority 'radical' section of the class," he says.

In blaming the Bolsheviks for the March Action disaster, Kellogg is in good company; this view is common among historians. But as my recent letter to International Socialism noted, evidence for such a judgment is lacking. Moreover, while Bolshevik leader Grigorii Zinoviev was certainly complicit in the March adventure, holding Lenin responsible is quite a leap. Kellogg brushes off Lenin's angry rejection of the March Action by saying "hindsight is always 20/20," but in fact Lenin's hostility to ultraleftism was well known, including from his 1920 pamphlet, *Left Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder*, his endorsement that same year of the "workers' government" demand following the Kapp Putsch in Germany, and his support of the German party's call for a united front in its January 1921 "Open Letter." [10] His writings in 1917 were in the same vein.

Kellogg asserts Lenin's responsibility on the basis of his support of the Red Army advance on Warsaw the previous year, an example, he says, of the same sort of "substitutionism." His extensive discussion of the Polish war is buttressed by a review of the Bolsheviks' record before the October 1917 revolution and back to 1905. He quotes approvingly a statement by Trotsky before 1905 that Lenin was "too much the Jacobin" and not enough a revolutionary socialist. [11] Indeed, Jacobinism, which Kellogg calls "the revolutionary form appropriate to revolutions against feudalism, such as the French revolution," was, he believes, a necessary component of the Russian uprisings of 1905 and 1917, given their (partially) anti-feudal character. And Jacobinism is necessarily substitutionist, he says.

Unexamined question

Kellogg's audacious line of argument, however, has carried him far from his starting point, which was the Comintern's Fourth Congress in 1922 and the causes of the German Communists' ultraleft adventure in March of the previous year.

His central contention, as I understand it, is that the Bolshevik Party carried over into the Comintern policies and a method shaped by the necessities of anti-tsarist struggle, which found expression in the International's "substitutionist" errors, such as the 1921 March Action.

The question he poses is certainly of interest, and I hope to address it in a separate contribution. But his explanation is so sweeping in character that it provides no insight into the question that he posed at the outset: how the Comintern became entangled in the March 1921 ultraleftist fiasco.

On the face of it, the circumstances are puzzling. The Comintern's Second Congress in 1920 took a series of strong positions against ultraleftism. These were confirmed and deepened in the Third Congress the following year. Yet in between, the Comintern leadership adapted increasingly to adventurist and sectarian positions, culminating in the March defeat.

An explanation can be found closer at hand than the disorienting influence of the Jacobins: in the Comintern's interaction during that year with the profoundly divided revolutionary working-class forces in Germany and neighbouring countries, during a period of unexpected ebb of workers' struggles in the main countries of Europe. A great deal of previously unavailable source material on this process will be found in my forthcoming volume on the Comintern's June-July 1921 Third Congress. [12]

A need to reengage

Kellogg is right: Lenin's Comintern is no infallible guide to socialist program and strategy in the twenty-first century. That said, we must guard against the impulse to turn our backs on its achievements. The early Comintern is strong on many issues where today's Marxism is weak; it engages with issues that today's Marxism often evades; even its errors, often overlooked, are instructive.

There is good reason for critical reengagement with Lenin's Comintern, as a vital link in the chain of working-class memory.

John Riddell, May 15, 2014

P.S.

* <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2014/05/15/weighing-the-legacy-of-lenins-comintern/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.socialiststudies.com/index.php/sss/article/view/304>

[2] Paul Kellogg, "Review of *Toward the United Front*," *Socialist Studies/Études socialistes*, vol. 9 (1), spring 2013, pp. 176-191. John Riddell, *Toward the United Front*, Chicago: Haymarket Books 2012.

[3] See Riddell, "The Comintern in 1922: The Periphery Pushes Back," *Historical Materialism*, scheduled for publication in 2014. This paper also references some other historians who, to various degrees, share Kellogg's viewpoint. For a shorter, online version, see "The Periphery Pushes Back" on this website.

[4] For a summary of this debate, see Riddell, *Toward the United Front*, pp. 13-20.

[5] Ian Birchall, "Grappling with the United Front," *International Socialism*, no. 13 (June 2012), pp. 195-205.

[6] Riddell, "Toward the United Front: Translations for the Twenty-First Century": <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2013/02/17/translations-for-the-twenty-first-century/>

[7] Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008.

[8] Leon Trotsky, "On the United Front," *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, vol. 2, pp. 91-5. Text available here: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffyci-2/08.htm>

[9] As for other elements of the Comintern program of 1919-23, many groups who look to the early Comintern approve the policies on trade unions, workers councils, and electoral activity, while paying little attention to those on farmers, cooperatives, and youth. Regarding policies on women and on the character of the revolutionary party, the balance sheet, in my opinion, is mixed.

[10] See Riddell, "[The Comintern and the origins of the united front policy](#)," available on ESSF (article 22600) and Pierre Broué, *The German Revolution, 1917-1923*, London: Merlin, 2006, pp. 390, 473.

[11] Kellogg is probably referring to Trotsky's 1904 pamphlet, *Our Political Tasks*, written in opposition to the Bolshevik faction formed at the second congress of the Russian Social Democracy the previous year. Trotsky's pamphlet is available here: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1904/tasks/index.htm>

[12] Riddell, *To the Masses: Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International, 1921*, Leiden: Brill, 2014.