

Revolutionaries & workers' governments: History & theory

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With the decline of Fianna Fáil and momentum behind Sinn Féin [in Ireland], the question of kicking out the establishment parties is likely to increasingly dominate politics. How revolutionaries engage with this process, what slogans we advance can either help to speed up the development of class consciousness or sow further illusions. Here Paul Murphy argues that the socialist left has much to learn from the history of and theory behind the workers' and left government slogans.

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In contemporary discussions about how revolutionaries should use a 'left government' slogan, we are not inventing the wheel. We are instead attempting to apply some of the high points of previous strategic Marxist thinking to today's situation. The theory behind this slogan, as well as the application of it, has a long, and contested history within the socialist movement. Despite the presence of confusion in the historic debates, there is a thread of clarity which comes from key participants, and which can be a foundation for utilising the concept effectively today.

The 'workers' government' slogan, which is the precursor of the "left government" slogan, was at the centre of a major debate in the Communist International - an international organisation of revolutionary socialist parties that was initiated by the Bolsheviks after the successful Russian Revolution. However, until the process of Stalinisation was underway from 1924, it was far from a monolithic organisation. It brought together sincere revolutionaries from different traditions across the world. Their passionate debates leap off the pages of John Riddell's incredible series of Congress transcripts.[1]

In studying this debate, and in particular, the contributions of those like Leon Trotsky and Karl Radek, who favoured the utilisation of this innovative slogan, it is important to recognise that they stood firmly on the ground of a Marxist understanding of the nature of the capitalist state and of revolutionary change. This was distilled in Lenin's classic, *State and Revolution*[2] (see 'It Doesn't Have to Be This Way' in *Rupture* Issue 2), which built on the work of Dutch revolutionary Anton Pannekoek.[3]

At the centre of *State and Revolution* is the notion that the state is not an empty vessel, which can be filled with either capitalist or socialist policies. It is a capitalist state, and at its core is a repressive apparatus (for example the Gardai, courts, and prison) used to defend the interests of big business. The election of a left-wing government doesn't change that fact. In fact, if the left

government doesn't simply betray its pledges, the class character of the state will come into sharp relief as it struggles to undermine the actions of the elected government.

There is therefore a big distinction between being 'in government' and being 'in power'. That is not even to mention the fact that, in a society based on private production for profit, key decision-making power lies in the hands of the capitalists directly. That is why any attempt to achieve a solely 'parliamentary road to socialism' has disastrously failed. Chile 1973 provides the classic and terrifying example, with the murder of thousands of people by the Pinochet regime, which was installed with the assistance of the CIA after the overthrow of socialist President Salvador Allende. There are other more contemporary ones: The actions of the top civil servants in the Greek state to cooperate with the Troika and frustrate the half-hearted efforts of Syriza to develop an alternative;[4] the role of the police tops in the coup against Morales in Bolivia;[5] and the threat by an unidentified general of 'mutiny' if Corbyn became Prime Minister in Britain.[6]

The clear lesson is that any attempt to construct a socialist society will inevitably be faced with a crucial choice - either capitulate before the external and internal forces of counter-revolution, or confront and break-up ('smash' in Lenin's words) the old capitalist state and replace it with a participative socialist democracy based on mass assemblies and election of representatives to workers' councils. All revolutionary processes, from the Paris Commune of 1871 through the Portuguese revolution to even the 'Squares' movement in Greece feature the outlines of that alternative workers' state. It comes into being, to a greater or lesser extent, as a consequence of the need of workers to organise both their struggle and the continuing operation of society. Socialist change will be successful or not based on the development of a mass movement from below, with its own structures of power, and the outline of a new democratic workers' state - which faces off with the capitalist state and wins.

The left wing of the Communist International, which Lenin described as 'ultra-left', saw in the workers' government slogan a retreat from these concepts. However, what they failed to understand was that rather than a retreat, it was an attempt to build on these basics and relate them to masses of working-class people, to connect current consciousness to an understanding of the need for such a revolutionary change.



Workers defending the railroad station in Berlin, 1919

German Revolution

Like the debate on the 'united front' within the Marxist movement, the workers' government debate was a product of the revolutionary movement in Germany. A united front of the revolutionary Communist Party (KPD), the reformist Social Democratic Party (SPD), and the centrist - i.e., wavering between reform and revolution - Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), together with the trade unions, had defeated a far-right putsch in March 1920. A trade union leader proposed that a government should be formed by all workers' parties and trade unions.

This is a very concrete illustration of what Trotsky wrote, 'from the united front flows the slogan of a workers' government'. [7] If the KPD was correctly for a united front of workers' organisations to protect workers' interests, were they also for extending that to the governmental plane? Attempting to answer this question caused a deep crisis within the KPD, with the leadership changing its position from day-to-day. [8] Belatedly, they declared themselves in favour of the formation a:

"socialist government free of the slightest bourgeois or capitalist element which would create extremely favourable conditions for vigorous action by the proletarian masses... The Party declares that its work will retain the character of a loyal opposition as long as the government does not infringe the guarantees which ensure the freedom of political activity of the working class, resists the bourgeois counter-revolution by all possible means, and does not obstruct the strengthening of the social organisation of the working class ... we mean that the Party will not prepare a revolutionary coup d'état, but will preserve complete freedom of action as far as political propaganda for its ideas is concerned." [9]

The left wing within the KPD then managed to overturn this decision after the moment of struggle had passed, and after a new government involving the SPD together with openly right-wing forces was formed. The new position simply abstained on this crucial question, arguing "the question of some possible future governmental combination is of secondary interest in relation to the struggle of the proletariat to arm itself and to construct workers' councils." [10]

Lenin gave his viewpoint in an appendix to his *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. [11] While criticising some of the formulations in the 'loyal opposition' resolution, including pointing out that 'social-traitors should not ... be called socialist', he endorsed the thrust of this approach, describing it as 'quite correct both in its basic premise and its practical conclusions'.

Given that this question was objectively posed by political conditions in Germany, and that there was no real clarity or common understanding amongst the leadership of the German Communists, it was bound to re-emerge as a point of controversy. However, when the question was concretely posed in October 1921, and the SPD and USPD asked the KPD whether they would join a "purely socialist government" (i.e. a government of those three parties), the KPD answered in the negative. [12] The Zentrale (Executive Committee) issued a statement saying that the KPD could "only play their revolutionary role if the Communists remained outside [of the government], and worked to push them forward by their criticism."

Karl Radek, a leading figure in both the Communist International and in the KPD, put forward a more nuanced position:

"The Communist Party can join any government that is willing to struggle against capitalism... The Party is not opposed in principle to participating in such a government. Of course for its own part, it takes its stand on the basis of a conciliar government [i.e. a government based on workers' councils], but that does not indicate the road along which the working class is to advance towards a conciliar government... The participation of the Communist Party in such a government would therefore depend on the specifics of the concrete situation." [13]

His reasoning is instructive. He argued the KPD should 'work out theses' in answer to the question (will you join a workers' government?) 'which were not "ninety per cent No!" and should give a positive response, not "tiresomely repeating old principles and old considerations" but taking a new step forward':

"This cannot be done unless the masses see that we want to change things in the way that is possible today, that is, not through propaganda about what divides us from them, but by realising and

deepening what the masses believe to be a possible way out of this situation.”[14]



Karl Radek

When they agreed to adopt a new programme at a Central Committee meeting in October 1922, by 24 votes to 23, as well as propagating ‘transitional slogans’ (later generalised by Trotsky in the ‘Transitional Programme’[15], it included a section on the slogan:

“At a moment when the spontaneous movement of the mass of the proletariat has reached a certain level and scale, in which its opposition to the bourgeoisie and to the workers’ leaders allied to them is growing stronger, but in which, however, the working class is not yet ready in its majority to leave the framework of bourgeois democracy, the slogan of a workers’ government forms the appropriate means by which to achieve a new stage in separating the broad proletarian masses from the bourgeoisie, and a new point of departure on a higher level for its movement towards the proletarian dictatorship.”[16]

Radek’s position won out within Germany, and the debate was then referred to the Communist International to be discussed at the Fourth Congress.

Fourth Congress of the Communist International

The Fourth Congress opened in Petrograd on 5 November 1922 with 350 full delegates from parties in 61 countries. John Riddell points out that three of those parties had more than 100,000 members (Czechoslovakia, Germany, Russia), nine others had memberships of over 10,000.[17] Most of the other European parties and a few others had parties in the thousands, while others were groups of hundreds.

The workers’ government debate opened in the first session with the report of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) and continued through much of the month-long Congress - in plenary sessions and commissions. Zinoviev introduced the ECCI report and created much confusion by declaring that “[w]e understand this slogan as an application of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”[18] In other words, he was saying that calling for a workers’ government is just the same as calling for a socialist republic based on workers’ councils. While that remains the understanding of some Marxist groups[19], it is clearly not what was intended by the originators of the slogan. Instead it refers to a government resulting from the processes of capitalist democracy.

The most leftist elements at the Congress, many of whom opposed participation in parliament and mainstream trade unions, unsurprisingly rejected the slogan outright. Amadeo Bordiga, for example, declared:

“we reject this tactic, because it jeopardises a foundation stone for the preparation of the proletariat

and party for revolutionary tasks, in return for the dubious benefits of achieving immediate popularity.”[20]

As in Germany, Radek proved to be the clearest on the importance and applicability of the slogan. He responded to Zinoviev effectively:

“The workers’ government is not the dictatorship of the proletariat – that is clear. It is one of the possible points of transition to the dictatorship of the proletariat... It would be entirely wrong to present a picture that the evolution of humanity from ape to people’s commissar necessarily passes through a phase of workers’ government. But this variant is historically possible.”

The final resolution on tactics[21] is broadly in step with Radek’s line of argument and differs from the first draft, arguing:

“Under certain circumstances, Communists must state their readiness to form a workers’ government with non-Communist workers’ parties and workers’ organisations. However, they should do so only if there are guarantees that the workers’ government will carry out a genuine struggle against the bourgeoisie along the lines described above.”[22]

In other words, it is only acceptable to enter government on the basis that it will not manage the capitalist system, but instead will open the door to overthrowing it.

Entry into government in Saxony & Thuringia

How to pose this conclusion in a popular way is a concrete question. While the Fourth Congress was underway, there were elections taking place in Saxony, Germany, which resulted in a majority for the Communists and Social Democrats. The Social Democrats, under pressure from their own left-wing, asked the Communists to participate in government with them. How would they respond?



Paul Klee

A debate unfolded in the corridors of the Fourth Congress[23], between the left of the KPD on the one side and the ‘right’ together with Lenin, Trotsky, Radek and Zinoviev on the other, about what conditions to put forward as a basis to join the government. The left said they had to insist on the arming of the workers and the calling of a congress of factory Councils. The right and the Russians argued against this and succeeded in winning agreement that the Communists should agree to join the government in principle, on the basis of ten far-reaching conditions. These conditions went from “requisition of empty or under-occupied residences for the benefit of badly-housed families of workers” (a very relevant demand for today) to the “joint national campaign for a workers’ government” in the whole of Germany.[24]

The SPD accepted all but one condition - the "obligation on the Landtag [local parliament] to endorse the decisions voted by the Saxon Congress of Factory Councils." On that basis, the KPD refused to participate and a minority government was formed of the SPD and USPD.

Trotsky later explained the argumentation of the Communists as follows:

"If you, our German Communist comrades, are of the opinion that a revolution is possible in the next few months in Germany, then we would advise you to participate in Saxony in a coalition government and to utilize your ministerial posts in Saxony for the furthering of political and organizational tasks and for transforming Saxony in a certain sense into a Communist drill ground so as to have a revolutionary stronghold already reinforced in a period of preparation for the approaching outbreak of the revolution. But this would be possible only if the pressure of the revolution were already making itself felt, only if it were already at hand. In that case it would imply only the seizure of a single position in Germany which you are destined to capture as a whole...."[25]

However, the Saxon government later collapsed, and the question of entering government was posed once more in January 1923. In the election campaign, the KPD used the workers' government slogan effectively to win support. The negotiation process followed the same basic pattern of 1922, resulting in a left SPD government, which the KPD voted for but didn't enter.[26]

The revolutionary process accelerated in Germany through the course of 1923, with increasingly large strikes and demonstrations of workers, and a left-right polarisation, with the German army threatening to subdue the left-wing regional governments by force. By September, the leaders of the Communist International decided that the KPD should now join the governments in Saxony and Thuringia, where a similar situation existed. Rather than being based on a change of attitude by the SPD leaders on the crucial question of the political role of the factory councils, this was done on a more pragmatic basis of using these states as a launching pad for revolution across Germany, as envisaged in Trotsky's explanation.[27]

The plan was to initiate a nationwide insurrection from Saxony with the Conference of Factory Councils at Chemnitz launching a call for a general strike to defend Red Saxony against the army. This tragically ended in fiasco when the left Social Democrats refused to go along with this plan, a development which seemingly the leading Communists had failed to anticipate or prepare for. The insurrectionary plans were called off (except for Hamburg where the countermanding orders never reached them), and the German Revolution ended with a whimper.

Trotskyist application of the 'left government' slogan

The situation in Germany was the highpoint of both the theory and practice of the workers' government slogan. The process of bureaucratisation of the Communist International rapidly accelerated with the defeat of the German revolution and Lenin's death in 1924. Trotsky's pamphlet inspired by the German revolution, 'Lessons of October', became the starting point of a 'literary debate' within the Soviet Union aimed at undermining Trotsky. The Stalinised Communist International had no need for a workers' government slogan: When in its 'Third Period' it simply condemned social democrats as 'social fascists', and later simply attempted to form 'Popular Front' Governments, not only with social democrats, but to administer capitalism with openly capitalist partners.

The Trotskyist left continued to seek to develop and utilise this approach where possible. Trotsky devoted a section of the 'Transitional Programme' to the 'Workers' and Farmers' Government.' While stressing that the creation of such a government by the traditional workers' parties was highly

improbable, he argues:

"However, there is no need to indulge in guesswork. The agitation around the slogan of a workers'-farmers' government preserves under all conditions a tremendous educational value. And not accidentally. This generalized slogan proceeds entirely along the line of the political development of our epoch (the bankruptcy and decomposition of the old bourgeois parties, the downfall of democracy, the growth of fascism, the accelerated drive of the workers toward more active and aggressive politics). Each of the transitional demands should, therefore, lead to one and the same political conclusion: the workers need to break with all traditional parties of the bourgeoisie in order, jointly with the farmers, to establish their own power."[28]

After Trotsky's death in 1940, the approach towards the slogan (which became increasingly cast as a "left" rather than "workers" or "workers and farmers" government, as people looked to the mass parties of the left, the social democrats and the Communists in some countries), broadly diverged into two categories, at least within the English-speaking revolutionary left. On the one side is an approach that tends only to recognise the dangers of the slogan and to warn against illusions in such a left government. This is epitomised in the historical approach of the International Socialist Tendency (including the SWP in Britain and the forerunners of the Socialist Workers Network - SWN - in Ireland), one that has been superseded by the practice of the SWN today. Chris Harman and Tim Potter, in an article which puts forward many valid points about the impossibility of reforming the capitalist state into a socialist state and the need for a revolutionary break with that state, fundamentally concludes:

"... the job of revolutionaries is to break the illusions that the workers have in a "left" government - and that means taking up all the partial limited struggles of workers, generalising them and leading them even if they conflict with the strategy of the government. In short, it is to organise a left opposition to the government, seeking to replace the reliance on the state with the self-organisation of workers."[29]

This seems to take too negative an approach to a positive aspiration of workers to install a government that serves their interests. There are good reasons that just a few years after 1917, the Comintern was already realising that in countries with developed parliamentary traditions, an approach that goes beyond bluntly counterposing the need for workers' councils to the bourgeois state might be necessary.

The other approach was that which was adopted by the Militant tendency in Britain. They sought to take the positive aspirations of working class people for a government in their interest and to connect it to the need for socialist change. This was summed up in the slogan "for a labour government on a socialist programme" - which was an attempt to make the same kind of call as the "workers' government" slogan, adapted to conditions where Marxists were working within a mass social democratic party.

Militant went even further than that, however, in making an "Enabling Act" through Parliament - nationalising the commanding heights of the economy - a crucial part of the same programme. For this, they were criticised by others on the revolutionary left.[30] However, when put forward as an illustration of what could be done by a Labour government, it has obvious strengths in making the possibility of socialist change real to people. As Lynn Walsh argued:

"The idea of an Enabling Act was put forward to cut through the reformist argument that it would be too complicated, and take too long, to get extensive nationalisation measures through parliament. It was precisely the idea of short-circuiting the parliamentary 'checks and balances' designed to impede any radical change."[31]

In *The State: A Warning to the Labour Movement*, Peter Taaffe argued that the Enabling Act, 'backed up by the power of the labour movement outside parliament, would allow the introduction of a socialist and democratic plan of production to be worked out and implemented ...'[32] Rather than seeing a left government slogan as a distraction or an illusion to be dismissed, Militant saw it as a crucial way of raising socialist consciousness.

Although this seems on balance a much stronger approach than timelessly contrasting a state based on workers' councils to the capitalist state, some criticisms can be levelled at it. In the first place, this seems to have been largely under-theorised and the connections with the debates of the Communist International were not brought out or meaningfully discussed.



Paul Klee turquoise

More substantively, the emphasis on the government being 'backed up by the power of the labour movement outside parliament' tends to give the forces outside of parliament a supporting rather than a leading role. Formulations which gave a greater emphasis to this struggle and the inevitable necessity of establishing organs of struggle which could grow into an alternative state would have served to raise consciousness further without appearing abstract.

Summarising the lessons from history

Distilling the lessons of the workers' government debate and experience in a variety of different contexts of course brings the danger of over-simplification. It is not a slogan which has universal relevance or applicability. However, in a context of rising class consciousness in countries with developed parliamentary traditions, it can be very effective in speeding up awareness that the government represents the rich and we need a government to serve the interests of ordinary people.

Of course, this may then pose the question of actually participating in a government. Revolutionaries should participate in a left government formed within capitalist society if it is a 'ruptural government'. In other words, a government that will not betray workers' interests by remaining within the rules of capitalism, but instead use this position to pursue a revolutionary struggle against capitalism. Through this struggle, it should seek to base itself on the self-organisation of working class people and the oppressed, and seek to replace the undemocratic and repressive capitalist state with an alternative workers' state based on popular assemblies and democratically elected and recallable Councils.

Even with that condition, we should not under-estimate the dangers involved. In particular, how the logic of 'governing' will present itself when participating with coalition partners less seriously committed to a programme of rupture from capitalism.

This was seen in Germany in October 1923. The mistake was not that the KPD participated in

governments with the left SPD in Saxony and Thuringia. The mistake was allowing that participation to blind the Communists to the likelihood of betrayal by the SPD left and to insufficiently prepare for revolution. To counteract that, whether revolutionaries participate or don't in a left government, it is necessary to emphasise the importance of struggle from below and to seek to develop alternative power structures at workplace and community level.

A lot has changed in the past 100 years, which means Ireland in 2021 is quite far from Germany 1923. The retreats in class consciousness and organisation are reflected in the fact that "workers" has been replaced by "left" in a slogan which will be understood by relatively wide layers. While "workers' government" has the advantage of clearly pointing to a government which takes the side of workers, "left government" has a more nebulous content. It needs to be supplemented to ensure it clearly points to the idea of a government of struggle.

However, the essence of the strategic method retains its relevance for today. In particular, Radek's encouragement to put forward our revolutionary socialist programme in a way that shows that "we want to change things in the way that is possible today... by realising and deepening what the masses believe to be a possible way out of this situation" is advice that bears repeating for all of us.

Paul Murphy

NOTES

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12. Broué, p. 651
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15. Leon Trotsky, 'The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International' (1938).
16. Quoted in Broué, p. 649
17. 'Toward the United Front', pp. 55-56
18. 'Toward the United Front', p. 130
19. E.g. 'Rearming Bolshevism: A Trotskyist Critique of Germany 1923 and the Comintern' (Spartacist, English Edition No. 56, 2001).
20. 'Toward the United Front', p. 182
21. Section 11, 'Theses on Tactics', pp. 1159-62, 'Toward the United Front'
22. Toward the United Front, p. 1160
23. Broué, p. 657
24. These demands are set out at p. 658, Broué.
25. Trotsky, 'The First Five Years of the Communist International, Volume 2' (1924) (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffyci-2/24b.htm>)
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P.S.

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https://rupture.ie/articles/workers-governments-history?fbclid=IwAR1q6lqo36ybu6B8Q_Kg0EliWx3p1G3AVGuFWBAy_lYgnU-ELljPl5xV2dA