

On April 30 members of **Open Polemic**

ended their membership of the CPGB. Here we print their reply to criticism of that decision

published in *Weekly Worker* (May 9 1996).

Below **Mark**

**Fischer** replies and we print three

documents submitted to the OP conference on

December 1 from

CPGB comrades

Party and pre-party

# Advance from vanguardism

## Organise communist rapprochement

**W**hen it was established in 1990, the Editorial Board of OP unequivocally adopted what it understood to be the scientific ideology of Marxism-Leninism, in the recognition that the communist movement as a whole, and not just particular segments of it, was in a deepening state of ideological confusion and theoretical disorder. If the revolutionary movement was to advance, the resolving of demarcations across and within the various segments, leading to the eventual integration of the movement, was essential and this demanded the development of an OP between communists at the highest possible, theoretical level.

### Polemic and Marxism-Leninism

To have attempted to initiate an OP among all those who simply called themselves communist would have been a quite pointless exercise on the part of OP. If polemic around a communist, scientific ideology was to take place at the highest possible level, that ideology needed to be defined and objective criteria established. This was necessary in order to determine who were qualified to participate. It could not be left open to possible opportunist manoeuvring.

Perhaps the main problem with using the term Marxism-Leninism is that certain revolutionaries claim it is a scientific ideology that is exclusive to them, with the consequent response that certain other revolutionaries disclaim it. The term Marxism-Leninism, however, does indicate that it is not a fixed ideology, that it can be further developed through its scientific methodology. It is not simply a composite of the 'truths' of this or that outstanding personality. If the term itself needs to be discarded and replaced with something else - and there may well be a case for that - it is a matter for the movement to decide at the appropriate time. Our scientific ideology remains our common property.

From its inception, OP therefore asserted that: "In order to build the unity of Marxist-Leninists we must first define Marxism-Leninism and distinguish the Marxist-Leninists."

At present OP puts forward its own basic definition of the communist, scientific ideology. Firstly, we see it as encompassing the further elaboration of the foundational outlook of dialectical and historical materialism. Secondly, as encompassing the further elaboration of fundamental principles, including the political and organisational principle of democratic centralism, the principle of the leading role of the Party both prior to and within the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the principle of proletarian internationalism.

### ■ Polemic between comrades

During the widespread confusion of the 1890s - and here we refer theoretically and principally to Russia - Lenin had insisted on a "polemic between comrades" in order "to explain the profound differences that exist, to obtain a comprehensive discussion of disputed questions".

Lenin's strategy was aimed at reforging the Party. Consequently, while giving space in his paper *Iskra* to polemics between comrades, he discussed all questions according to his particular line.

OP however was concerned that, unlike the more fluid situation prevailing in Russia at the end of the 19th century, the communist movement at the end of the 20th century, both nationally and internationally, was transfixed into a variety of vanguardist organisations, each advancing their particular, revolutionary programmes for the working class.

The strategy of OP, being empathetic to but nevertheless distinct from that of Lenin's, is aimed at integrating the movement. Consequently, while giving space in OP to polemics between comrades, it endeavours to discuss all questions according to its general line as opposed to a particular line.

### ■ Vanguardism

During the present time of ideological confusion and theoretical disorder among communists, the revolutionary vanguard party cannot exist. What does exist is a variety of vanguardist organisations each assuming that it has resolved fundamental theoretical questions.

In general, the vanguardist organisation approaches OP, if at all, with the aim of settling demarcations with its victory over the others, whereas OP advocates developing rapprochement among communists by collectively resolving demarcations. Any OP that the vanguardist organisation does allow is therefore contained as far as possible within its own press, in order to ensure that its particular line prevails. It is the prevalence of this approach to communist unity which constitutes the historical phenomenon of vanguardism. And it is the discipline of the organisations making up this phenomenon which maintains the communist movement in its present state of fragmentation.

The single Communist Party is not established and, although subjectively unintentional, when taken together we have objectively a betrayal of the revolutionary interest.

Contrary to the extraordinary claim that some make, OP is obviously not against the organisation of the vanguard party. Quite the opposite. OP's case for communist rapprochement around the elaboration of a common theoretical programme was not 'presented as an alternative to the CPGB draft programme'. Drawn from OP's strategy, it is a definite rejection of the 'Leninist'

tactics on the question of programme. The elaboration of a common theoretical programme for communists is the only possible basis for the establishment of the future party of a new type and, in fact, is not the 'substitute for' but the alternative to the continuation of fragmentation in the form of particular, vanguardist programmes. OP goes further in envisaging that such a programme would affirm that the revolutionary vanguard party of the future will be multanimous, and will therefore be historically non-specific, within the outlook of the scientific ideology of what OP at present refers to as Marxism-Leninism. But let us repeat - Marxism-Leninism is just a label. It is the content behind the label that is all important for the OP project.

### ■ The multanimous party

A multanimous party is politically and organisationally capable of sustaining many collective and individual views. This not only involves members more completely in its democracy, it enhances its theory and practice. Most importantly, it enables the party to contain differences within Marxism-Leninism wherever and whenever it is possible to do so and thereby avoid damaging splits and fragmentation.

Since the Russian revolution and its immediate aftermath, communists - individually and collectively - have generally defined other communists according to their attitude towards the Soviet Union. Bearing upon the character and outcomes of the world revolutionary process, these definitions were particularly contemporaneous to the continued existence of the Soviet Union and therefore the subject of the most bitter disputes among revolutionaries. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, in their specific sense these definitions have become matters of historical interpretation. To advocate a multanimous party that is historically non-specific simply means that we need to focus increasingly upon the historical universal in order to make progress.

### ■ Leader centralism

The practice of leader centralism in the guise of democratic centralism is incompatible with a multanimous party that is structured to ensure equality of opportunity in the independent collective elaboration and articulation of ideas.

OP has determined that the seeds of leader centralism are to be found in class society itself and it is particularly manifest in bourgeois class culture, but its universal practice in the communist movement developed essentially within the political organisation of democratic centralism. It gained its strength from a tradition that bestows upon the central committee of the Party the right to collectively elaborate theory, programme and strategy. This elevates the central committee above the Party centre - its congress. It encourages not only the tactical formation of covert factions intent on gaining the vantage point of the central committee, it also fosters the cult of the personality.

The universal practice of leader centralism is not simply associated with parties in power: ie, those with a special relationship to the state under the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is also associated with parties that are not in power. Neither is it

practice to be associated only with the Soviet Union, for it was developing prior to the October revolution and is continuing in all vanguardist organisations since its collapse. Neither is its practice to be associated only with one tradition in the communist movement, for it is practised in all traditions. And neither is leader centralism to be associated only with the cult of the personality, for its practice is generally of a collective character.

## OP and the Leninist faction

In pursuing its general line for the integration of the movement, OP has undoubtedly placed itself in a state of unity and conflict with the vanguardist organisations, no more so than with the 'Leninist' faction of the old CPGB which, following the launch of *The Leninist*, forerunner of the *Weekly Worker*, in 1981, has given the movement a relentless rendition of its own particular 'Iskra' strategy.

A 'Leninist' review of the first issue of OP's journal was thoroughly negative and hostile. OP was obliged to point out that it had the same goal as the 'Leninist', the formation of a single Communist Party in this country and that: "It is only our strategic approach to this vital task that differs. As such, objectively we are allies and not adversaries of yourselves and the other 30 vanguards."

Despite regarding OP as being by definition abstract and ineffectual, and unrelated to political intervention, some five years later, the 'Leninist' was inviting OP to work for communist rapprochement as a faction under the banner of the 'CPGB'.

By the beginning of 1990, ironically the same year that OP came into existence, the 'Leninist' was confirming its sectarian credentials, declaring that it was "the only revolutionary wing of our movement" and that to be a "genuine" communist, one had to accept its "lead" and its "discipline".

Although it could not bring itself to formulate any definition of Marxism-Leninism, the 'Leninist' not only argued that "Marxism-Leninism is powerful because it is true", it asserted that it was necessary to equip the Party with a "Marxist-Leninist programme". It went on to say, and this is significant to its most recent tactics concerning programme, that this would depend on 'reforging the Party and then convening a congress' and that the 'Leninist' would prepare a draft programme and present it "in the form of a proposal to the congress of the reformed CPGB".

However, by its Fifth Congress at the end of that same year, the 'Leninist' resolved to transform itself into the 'Communist Party of Great Britain' and call its own National Committee the Provisional Central Committee of the 'Party'.

For the 'Leninist' leadership this meant that it could pursue its 'Iskra' strategy with all the authority that it had bestowed upon itself by appointing itself as the leadership of a 'CPGB' politically organised in accordance with the 'Leninist' version of democratic centralism.

## OP and the CPGB (Leninist)

Undeniably, the CPGB ('Leninist') has the politically significant distinction among the numerous vanguardist organisations of allowing its members the right to form factions. Its PCC (the 'Leninist' leadership), despite its continuing insistence that OP was "a reactionary diversion", later extended its particular concepts on factions with an invitation for OP to join the

'CPGB' as a faction. Presumably by such an act the comrades of OP could then be looked upon as 'genuine' communists. By the same token, if they took the decision to leave on a future occasion, they could then be vilified as not being 'genuine' communists.

Despite its misgivings, for OP this 'CPGB' development seemed to present the possibility of a definite break with the impasse of sectarian vanguardism, for it carried the prospect of advancing OP and rapprochement into the arena of transitional Party, political organisation. Of even greater, particular significance was the prospect of OP and the 'Leninist', with their different approaches to communist rapprochement, acting together in the revolutionary interest.

It was evident to OP however that the 'Leninist', with its established control of the leadership of the 'Party', was still intent on continuing the practice of leader centralism within the 'CPGB'. In the view of OP, any organisation joining the 'CPGB' as a faction would not be polemicising on equal terms with the 'Leninist' which had put on the mantle of the Provisional Central Committee. It would be polemicising on unequal terms with the 'leadership of the Party'. As it transpired, the various organisations recognised this reality and have been more than circumspect in taking up the invitation to join the 'CPGB' as factions.

Being in leader centralist mode themselves, they have their own interest in the possibility of attaining leadership status before they commit themselves to such a step. So, in general, those with any interest in the 'CPGB' who were still clinging to their 'vanguardist' backgrounds were interested in the possible opportunity to put forward their programmatic approach, which well suited the tactics of the 'Leninist'.

Being in declared opposition to the continuation of the practice of leader centralism in any future party of a new type, the OP Editorial Board as a whole was not prepared to enter the 'CPGB' as a faction. It nevertheless recognised the necessity of responding to such a significant development in a positive way but more importantly, it also recognised that the revolutionary interest demanded the maintenance of the political independence of OP.

OP subsequently responded to the invitation from the 'CPGB' with a comprehensive statement which was published in its Broad-sheet No4 and also in the *Weekly Worker*. This statement included its decision that: "Representatives of OP would therefore join the CPGB on the basis that this would constitute a particular and significant extension of OP's general strategy for OP across the revolutionary movement.

"On entry as members of the party, these comrades would, however, regard themselves as the party's Provisional Polemic Committee, responsible for the facilitation and practice of OP as OP's particular contribution to the work of reforging the CPGB... They would do so despite OP's deep reservation that the 'Leninist' faction, at present, lacks the necessary political maturity to cooperate with others in carrying through the process of rapprochement."

It was perfectly obvious that the different approaches of OP and the 'PCC' to the question of Party could result in a certain antagonism within the process of rapprochement. These antagonisms would not be resolved by any demand that OP representational members must automatically adhere to all majority decisions. The comrades con-

cerned were entering the 'CPGB' as part of their revolutionary duty towards the rapprochement process. They were not joining a particular vanguardist organisation because they agreed substantially with its particular programme.

OP therefore took the view and still takes the view that in accepting the principle of representational entry, the PCC had accepted the entry of another kind of member than had been the case previously. A situation had developed which posed questions concerning the practice of democratic centralism within a 'Party' which had yet to be reformed.

## ■ Transitional political organisation

Given the long experience and self-discipline on the part of the OP comrades, and given goodwill on both sides, there was some prospect that any difficulties arising during the period of transitional political organisation could be overcome and that the process itself could open up the possibility of other organisations coming in under the banner of the 'CPGB'.

Of interest is the fact that the 'Leninists' of the CPGB at their Fourth Congress in 1989 recognised the difficulties of transitional political organisation when they asserted that: "With us the two sides of democratic centralism will only be fully realised when the Communist Party is reformed. Till then the Leninists of the CPGB operate democratic centralism emphasising centralism based on consent."

However, it became clear to the representational comrades from OP on the first day of their entry that the leading comrades in the PCC were not taking this position when they insisted on treating the OP comrades simply as individual recruits. They refused to recognise that the OP comrades' first commitment was to the movement as a whole through their work on the OP Editorial Board and that this could, on certain, very particular questions, conflict with majority decisions and the directives of the PCC (the 'Leninist' leadership).

OP did consider effecting a immediate suspension of its representational entry at the time but, on further reflection, it considered that such a step could set back the embryonic process of communist rapprochement that had begun within the context of reforging the CPGB. Despite the inflexibility and intransigence of the leading members of the PCC, the OP Editorial Board therefore decided that their representational members should remain in the 'CPGB' and, through polemical example, encourage others to join the struggle for communist rapprochement.

It is relevant to point out here that the polemical column written by OP's Bob Smith, which at times was particularly critical of the PCC, continued to be published regularly in the *Weekly Worker*.

However, it is also relevant to point out the difficulties being experienced by OP comrades in developing OP's representational relationship within the 'CPGB' which was of crucial importance in view of the fact that other organisations were considering their relationship to the 'CPGB'. In particular, the differences between the OP comrades and the PCC on the ongoing question of democratic centralism finally came to a head in the particular context of PCC directives concerning the Summer Offensive of the 'CPGB'.

When a representative of OP tentatively posed the level of voluntary contribution that OP comrades might collectively make to the Summer Offensive of the 'CPGB', he received a terse note

from the National Organiser which stated: "The PCC briefly discussed the problem you have raised re: your participation in this year's Summer Offensive. As you are aware, the Party as a whole has endorsed both the organisation's overall target and the minimum for members. You were present at these discussions and proposed nothing different. We do not consider the minimum for Party members to be negotiable."

Here, the fact that OP comrades were prepared to consider making a voluntary contribution is described as a problem and the fact that the OP comrade was a representative of OP is dismissed.

Subsequently, in the PCC's April 22 letter, in a cleverly confusing, penultimate paragraph on the Summer Offensive, Comrade Fischer ignores the fact that the OP comrades deliberately took a position of political abstention on the Perspectives '96 document which was a curious mixture of reports, criticisms and propositions. The OP comrades took their position, firstly, because full participation in discussion would tend to automatically subject them to all majority decisions. Secondly, these were early days in representational entry and as the 'CPGB' was still essentially the 'Party' of the 'Leninists', there was a need to recognise and perhaps to understand its particular, democratic centralist approach to taking decisions.

As the matter of finance and the Summer Offensive, which was primarily to do with the 'Leninist' trying to impose its decisions on the OP comrades, was not resolved with an exchange of letters and, in the light of previous difficulties concerning their membership status, the OP comrades decided that the best course was to refer the matter back to their Editorial Board.

At its meeting on April 30 1996, the OP Editorial Board resolved to suspend its representational entry and withdraw its representational members from the 'CPGB' in order to: "allow for the possible re-establishment of its representational entry on the basis of a mutually clearer understanding of the process of communist rapprochement under the banner of the CPGB."

The OPEB indicated that this would entail discussions taking place between itself and the PCC. However, this way of dealing with the problem was refuted by the PCC when it responded by going ahead with an indirect and provocative 'criticism' of the ex-OP representational members at its May aggregate and with the publishing of articles by its leading members in the *Weekly Worker* which took as their starting point the false accusation that OP's decision was a 'shameful action'.

## Communist rapprochement

Both OP and the 'Leninist' stand for communist rapprochement, for the unity of revolutionaries and for OP within the future party of a new type. But their distinctively different strategies for achieving that end immediately placed them in a state of conflict with each other. Their particular unity, under the banner of the 'CPGB', therefore represented a significant development which carried far reaching implications for the process of rapprochement across the movement. The possibility for theoretical fusion and then agreement on strategy had been opened by the PCC with its invitation for OP to work under the banner of the 'CPGB', and OP's positive response had further increased that possibility.

Not being a vanguardist organi-

sation or a factional product of any such organisation, OP does not advance a particular programme for the class. Nevertheless, it is prepared to work in a principled and disciplined way with any vanguardist organisation that is looking towards the eventual establishment of a single, Communist Party, provided that provision is made for OP to put forward its views. In the eventuality of such a Party - which might possibly be a reformed CPGB - being established, the continued existence of OP as a distinct body will become unnecessary. In this, OP does not demand that its version of democratic centralist, political organisation be put into place before there can be any organisational coming together, but it does consider it necessary to have a degree of flexibility in political organisation.

However, ignoring its previous, conditional references to democratic centralism of 1989 and failing to recognise the necessity for developing a transitional relationship in - or a transitional form of - political organisation, the 'Leninist' has tried to impose its own version of the political and organisational principle of democratic centralism.

Communist rapprochement is a coming together of comrades and the establishment or renewal of cordial relations between individuals and groups of communists. The process of rapprochement among communists involves agreement in common at the highest possible theoretical level. It should not be confused or entangled with the process of majority decision for action in common among the class.

The process of rapprochement between the 'Leninist' and OP took the organisational form of the latter's representational entry into the 'CPGB'. It opened up the possibility for the advance of rapprochement between a number of other organisations. The 'Leninist', however, persistently entangled this rapprochement process with its own democratic centralist process. It constantly insisted that the OP representational members had the 'same rights and duties' as other members and must therefore participate in all decision making and be subject to all majority decisions, as though the Party was already reformed. The 'Leninist' has yet to understand that however hard it might try, communist rapprochement cannot be developed through majority decision, under its banner. It can only be developed by common agreement. That was the hard lesson that had to be learned by those communists who came together to establish the old CPGB in 1920.

Formal discipline based on majority decisions can only be exercised on the completion of the rapprochement process, with the actual establishment of a future party of a new type which may or may not be a reformed CPGB. In the meantime, we must rely on the self-discipline of those who put the general revolutionary interest above particular vanguardist interest.

## The Draft Programme of the 'Leninist'

The 'Leninist' wing of the old CPGB had been very clear concerning its approach to the question of revolutionary programme for the class. At its Fourth Congress in December 1989, it stated: "The essence of the struggle being conducted by the CPGB (The Leninist) is to equip our Party with a Marxist-Leninist programme. The provision of the CPGB with a Marxist-Leninist programme depends on reforging the Party and

then convening a congress.

"Taking this into consideration our conference resolves that the Leninist wing of the Party must: a) Prepare a draft programme. b) Establish a commission for this purpose. c) Present the draft programme for discussion in Party organisations and in our working class. d) Present the draft programme in the form of a proposal to the congress of the reformed CPGB."

The 'Leninist' however created an immediate antagonism with OP when it departed from even this programmatic position. By the end of 1995, it was no longer referring to the draft programme of the "Leninist wing of the Party", it was referring to its draft programme as being the "CPGB's draft programme" and that this would be "a powerful weapon in the fight for a reformed Party."

A year later without, of course, any congress of the reformed Party having been convened, the 'Leninist' employed a standard, leader centralist procedure. It published its own, factional draft programme in the *Weekly Worker* in the form of a proposal emanating from the PCC. It asserted that, following the draft programmes of 1935 and 1951 elaborated by the leaderships of the old, well established CPGB, its draft programme was destined to be the draft third programme of a Party that had yet to be reformed! So here was a self-appointed PCC, supposedly committed to rapprochement under a pro-Party banner, acting as though it was already the central committee elected by an actual Congress of a reformed Party.

Dismissing OP's central concern that vanguardist propagation of programmes for the class was actually retarding the process of communist rapprochement, Jack Conrad of the 'Leninist' even informed us that their draft programme was 'not simply designed for the future'. He went on to claim that, "In arriving at and then propagating an agreed draft programme and rules we can greatly enhance the struggle to reforge the Party." The Perspectives '96 document followed with its own claim that the publication of the "draft third programme" was "undoubtedly a step forward for our Party".

For OP, the only other organisation to have a faction within the 'CPGB', this leader centralist presentation of programme was a step backward. It immediately drew a protest from the OP comrades and prompted it to publish in OP No12 its case for 'The common theoretical programme for communists', which it would regard as the preparation for and therefore not to be confused with the maximum programme itself. Putting the case for the elaboration of such a programme is consistent with its strategy and constitutes OP's response not only to the tactics of the 'Leninist', vanguardist faction but a response to others who were still insisting on advancing their own particular revolutionary programmes for the class.

### ■ The 'Leninist' and the SLP

Central to the 'Leninist' draft programme is its particular understanding of the relationship of party and class both prior to and within the dictatorship of the proletariat and it was this understanding which was to inform its strategic approach towards the formation of the Socialist Labour Party. As a consequence, it acquired the vainglorious notion that this initiative by a left breakaway from the Labour Party could actually be moulded into a Communist Party.

In pursuing this notion and ne-

glecting its own initiative for rapprochement under the banner of the 'CPGB', it took the decision to propagate the 'Leninist' draft programme for the class within the SLP. As this would be recognised by the movement as the 'draft third programme', OP could hardly fail to be associated with it and, ludicrously, the OP comrades were also expected to dutifully go along with this voluntarist attempt at reorganising the Party out of the SLP. Ironically, the 'Leninist's' activism around its own Party and class scenario contained a glaring contradiction. If communists could achieve a degree of rapprochement sufficient to mould the SLP into a Communist Party, they would actually be fit enough to begin that task independently. There would, in fact, be no need for the SLP. It is precisely because communists were not yet in that position that the SLP initiative came to be viewed as the alternative to the single Communist Party. According to the outlook of the 'CPGB', this contradiction could only be overcome if 'genuine' communists accepted the 'lead and discipline' of the 'Leninist' and gathered all the "partisans of the class" around them.

From the outset, the initiators of the SLP were giving it a left social democratic orientation and those communists who were at all interested in it were in no fit state to change its developing social democratic features. As OP argued at the time, the SLP could well be an opportunity for further communist rapprochement and action in common but, in the existing circumstances, there was infinitesimal potential for it to become the future party of a new type. The formation of the revolutionary Party of the class remained the theoretical and organisational task for communists.

The 'revolutionary' scenario within the SLP became yet a further display of the impotence of vanguardist fragmentation. Communists do not waste their time on what is remotely possible; they fight for what is necessary, and what is necessary today is the ending of all manifestations of vanguardism. What is necessary is communist OP and rapprochement to establish the future party of a new type.

While the 'Leninist' (and all other factions) insists on discussing all questions from the standpoint of its particular, programmatic propositions, OP insists that all questions need to be discussed in terms of its general proposition: the need to elaborate a common theoretical programme for communists.

However, OP is concerned that the 'Leninist' should contrive to use its own political and organisational version of democratic centralism as the means to foster majority activism and thereby insinuate the dominance of its draft programme into the rapprochement process within the 'CPGB'. This tactic is the reason why the 'Leninist's' demanded of the OP representational members that they participate in all discussion and decision taking and abide by all majority decisions. In this way they could create a 'Party' ethos of democratic centralist normality and discipline through which the OP comrades would be actually drawn into becoming activists around the development of the 'Leninist' programme.

### The advance from vanguardism

The decision by the PCC of the 'CPGB' to accept the representational entry of OP, with its 'non-

vanguardist' strategy for communist rapprochement, represented an advance from vanguardism. The 'Leninist' faction was moving closer to the position of OP, towards a general line for the 'Party'. With wider, OP in the columns of the *Weekly Worker*, it was beginning to open up the political and organisational possibility of integrating the movement through the 'reforging of the CPGB'. In this, it should have seen OP as a principled partner.

However, it almost immediately suffered a loss of nerve. The 'Leninist' faction on the PCC could not build upon its own initiative because it sought to subordinate OP to its particular line. It was not prepared to break with the practice of leader centralism for this would have entailed an admission of its own continued existence as a faction and would also have required an insistence that OP be represented on the PCC. Instead, the 'Leninist' faction remained clandestine and even held back from extending an invitation for OP members to serve on the PCC.

The PCC did not even consult the OP representational faction on any question when, if it was serious about communist rapprochement, it was imperative that it should have done so. It retreated back to vanguardism. The 'Leninist' programme for the class was put forward in the name of the PCC and then published as part of its strategy for moulding the SLP into a Communist Party.

The experience of OP in the 'CPGB' has demonstrated that the practice of leader centralism lies first and foremost within the authority bestowed upon the central committee and that overt factionalism cannot, of itself, resolve the problem of leader centralism within communist parties. It also raises the question as to whether the process of communist rapprochement can succeed within an established, vanguardist organisation without all factions being openly declared and a transitional form of political organisation being put into place.

In retrospect, it can clearly be seen that both the OPEB and the 'Leninist' entered the process of rapprochement with insufficient preparation. In the light of this, the OPEB does not believe that recommitments and apportioning of blame for the current impasse will be particularly useful. Concrete proposals are needed to take the rapprochement process forward.

### Proposals for the forming of a Communist Rapprochement Committee

These proposals for the forming of a Communist Rapprochement Committee independent of all other organisations are put forward in the spirit of rapprochement. Although the OP Editorial Board will continue to make its case for the elaboration of a common theoretical programme for communists, it does not demand the acceptance of its views on the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism or on the question of programme, or on vanguardism, the multanimous party and leader centralism as a precondition for membership of the committee. All will work for communist rapprochement in the way that they see fit.

### ■ Membership criteria

It is suggested that the Minimal Platform agreed by the Provisional Central Committee of the CPGB and 'For a Permanent Party Polemic Committee' (faction of the

(CPGB) [see the *Weekly Worker* February 8 1996] could be considered as the basis for determining membership criteria for the committee.

### ■ Consensus democracy

It is suggested that there be regular monitoring to establish the degree of theoretical agreement being achieved and that support for all decisions for action be recorded.

All members of the committee should have the unquestioned right not to participate in majority actions with which they have particular, principled disagreement.

### ■ Publications

It is suggested that the committee consider the distribution of a regular publication aimed at the communist movement.

Although it must be stressed that

the OPEB envisages a non-exclusive committee with clear membership criteria, in the first instance it is directing its proposals to those organisations with which it has been most closely associated in the rapprochement process, namely, the CPGB (PCC), the Revolutionary Democratic Group (faction of the SWP) and the Trotskyist Unity Group.

The OPEB therefore proposes that two of its representatives meet with two representatives from each of the above organisations with a view to establishing as rapidly as possible a suitable basis for themselves and other organisations to join together in forming a Communist Rapprochement Committee. Other organisations and individuals are asked for their views ●

OP  
July 1996

# OP and the struggle for democratic centralism

Mark Fischer replies

**T**he OP organisation would deserve little or no attention were it not for the small amount of harm it can now do to the still fragile process of communist rapprochement. On December 1 it will organise a conference under the banner of its version of "communist rapprochement", a conference which in fact is convened in implicit opposition to the real process of rapprochement that OP has slithered away from in the Communist Party.

In the document we reprint here and in others we refer to, OP has started to position itself as an *opponent* of the fight for a reformed Communist Party and must be exposed as such. Given limitations of space, I can only really refute the main fabrications in its charges against the Party. At the risk of overkill, I think we should return in detail to this question in subsequent issues of our paper not simply to bury the lies, but to pack down the earth to make sure they never go on a ghoulish walkabout ever again.

### ■ OP and the Communist Party

A substantive theme of OP's case against our organisation is that we have made only a partial break from what it incorrectly dubs 'vanguardism'. Thus, it warns us in its *OP update* (October 96) that we are in "retreat ... back to vanguardism" (p3). OP's engagement in the rapprochement initiative of our organisation is presented as an important practical test which completely fazed us. Apparently, after having "[moved] closer to the position of OP", we "almost immediately suffered a loss of nerve" (p2) with this strange new concept and scuttled in the opposite direction.

In fact, our understanding of Party and democratic centralism has been a consistent and *defining* theme of our organisation. In *The Leninist* No3 (September 1982), we issued a call to "all genuine

communists to join the Communist Party of Great Britain" and amongst others we targeted the group around the *Proletarian* magazine, then the organisational home of today's leading members of OP. We emphasised that we made this call despite our many theoretical differences, "for although wanting them all to orientate themselves to the Party, we have many disagreements with them". The Proletarian group, for instance, we classified as "left centrist, pulled to revolutionary politics but at the same time unable to make the break from a tailist, completely unscientific approach to the policies of the Soviet party and state" (*ibid*, p1).

The following issue of *The Leninist* (No4, April 1983) featured the Proletarian reply, a response that we underlined exposed "the impotency, the pedantry and ideological poverty of sectarianism" (*Ibid*, p37). Our call for communist unity in the ranks of the CPGB was rejected, as "the CPGB is organised on *democratic centralist* lines - the principles of which today prevent the formation of publications not under central committee control" (*Ibid*, p39). In other words, a typical *bureaucratic* centralist understanding of communist organisation.

The subsequent collapse of the Proletarian group - amid sordid accusations of the ill-treatment of members and the arbitrary exercise of personal dictatorship by the organisation's 'founder-leader', Keith Neilson - was precipitated by the rise of Gorbachevite counterrevolution in the Soviet Union. Proletarian's world view - defined by uncritical loyalty to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union - was shattered.

In many ways, OP is the traumatised child of the abusive Proletarian parent. Key elements of the OP world view - like its anti-Leninist notions of "leader-centralism", for example - are actually subjective theorisations of

its leading members' negative experiences in the world of pro-Soviet sects on the exotic edges of official communism.

Consequently, its description of the inner-world of the CPGB reads quite bizarrely to anyone who knows anything of our organisation, or who even picks up the *Weekly Worker* occasionally. Thus, an odd piece by Bob Smith in the latest *OP update* (November 1996), reports a telephone chat with a chum of his where he speaks darkly of his days in a Party with "an iron tight control of the Party press by just one faction" (remember, comrades, this is the *Weekly Worker* he is talking about), lorded over by "one erudite theoretician" and his servile "loyal handful of functionaries" who would "cower back" at the displeasure of the master.

Warming to his theme, Bob gets quite vexed with the revolutionary left in general, as "they all have their great leaders who they elevate to the status of gods. And they all strut about with their omniscient airs followed by a handful of sycophantic sidekicks. Every so often, one of the sidekicks gets fed up with being kicked about and bugger off. When that happens the question of democratic centralism comes to the fore" (*Ibid*).

Of course, the particularly queer aspect of this article is that Bob is recounting a friendly chin wag with a mate in the Stalin Society. Arbitrary exercise of personal power, bureaucratic terrorism masquerading as 'democratic centralism', pulverising terror against cadre - the chap probably thought Bob was describing an idyllic state of inner-party life.

More seriously, what you see evidenced here is not a genuine picture of the state of affairs in our organisation, as comrade Smith - the author of a weekly critical column in the pages of our press - knows full well. Rather we see the pathology of a bruised individual who has been through the mincer of 'official communism'.

Similarly, the studied refusal of OP members in the Communist Party to pass comment on the major events of the 20th century in preference to statements of the most generalised 'Marxist-Leninist' banality, is explained by the effective collapse of their Stalinite universe in 1991. When flushed out of their hiding holes by Party debate, the two leading OP comrades gave ample illustration of their real world view - left Stalinism. Understandably, they were reticent about shouting this from the roof tops ... and had the handy theory of 'historic non-specificity' (ie, keeping your mouth shut in case anyone finds out what you actually think) to justify their embarrassed silence.

What an honest observer sees in the evolution of our organisation is a continuity. Clearly, it was the comrades from OP that made a partial - but healthy - break with their previous sectarianism when they approached the CPGB for membership. This was warmly welcomed by our organisation as a realisation of our aim back in 1982 of "detaching genuine communists" from sectarianism and winning their adherence to *Partysism*.

## ■ Party?

OP profess to believe that the root of our problem comes from our apparent confusion of being "simultaneously both the Communist Party and the pre-Party organisation" (Ray Hickman, *OP update*, November 1996). We thus attempt to impose a manifestly inappropriate form of organisation for this stage - democratic centralism.

This is a charge that OP shares with the International Socialist

Groupers, Ian Land and Julian Alford, of course. But unlike OP these two at least seem to understand that they cannot - without major surgery - prove this assertion from anything our organisation has actually written or said. Instead, they suggest in contrast to all our public assertions our organisation "secretly believes it is the Party" (*Weekly Worker* letters page, September 26 - my emphasis). OP is idiotic enough to actually try and prove it from our own words.

In fact, our organisation is premised on the understanding that it is not the Communist Party. The Communist Party of Great Britain was liquidated as a Party in the 1980s and 90s by the opportunists. As members of this Party - organised in a Leninist wing - our responsibilities did not melt away with the capitulation of the liquidationists to the bourgeoisie. We did not surrender our positions. As Leninist members of the Party, we used the opportunity presented by their final betrayal to seize its banner and to continue the fight to re-establish it on a sound, revolutionary basis.

Today the PCC does not claim to be the central committee of a reformed Communist Party. The PCC is a continuation of itself, a contemporary manifestation of an ongoing struggle for a reformed CPGB. It is the leading Party committee that coordinates this fight to re-establish, reformed and renew the Party - "a title we intend to preserve not simply because of past achievements but because, as Marx, Engels and in his turn Lenin argued it is the 'only' name for our movement 'that is scientifically correct'" (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 27, Moscow 1977, p127).

In its polemic reprinted here, it reminds readers of our insistence that it is necessary to equip the Party with a 'Marxist Leninist programme'. It is important, OP suggests, that our organisation then "went on to say, and this is significant to its most recent tactics concerning programme, that this would depend on 'reforging the Party and then convening a congress' and that the 'Leninist' would prepare a draft programme and present it 'in the form of a proposal to the congress of the reformed congress of the reformed CPGB'".

"However," they write, "by its Fifth Congress, at the end of that same year, the 'Leninist' resolved to transform itself into the 'Communist Party of Great Britain' and call its own national committee the Provisional Central Committee of the 'Party'" (*Advance from vanguardism*, emphasis in original).

By sleight of hand OP tries to prove that in our mind's eye, we now view ourselves as the reformed Party with an adopted programme. Thus the CPGB has, it claims, "published its own, factional draft programme in the *Weekly Worker* in the form of a proposal emanating from the Provisional Central Committee ... here was a self-appointed Provisional Central Committee, supposedly committed to rapprochement under a pro-Party banner, acting as though it was already the central committee elected by an actual congress of a reformed Party" (*Ibid* emphasis in original).

Firstly as a point of information, the Provisional Central Committee was voted into position by a conference of our organisation - it is its elected leadership.

On the substantive point, the Party and the PCC have no adopted programme. This has been said time and time again to OPers. It has gone beyond misunderstanding. They are liars.

The Party instructed one leading individual - comrade Jack Conrad - to produce a draft programme based on a mass of material drawn

from a year of seminars on the question undertaken by our organisation in 1991/92. The comrade has individual responsibility for what he has produced from this material. The purpose was not to draw up the Party programme, but rather to give comrades "something to get their teeth into" for subsequent discussions (Jack Conrad, introductory comments to his draft programme, *Weekly Worker*, September 21 1995).

At the Party's London seminar of September 8, the issue was clarified again for the lone OP rep who showed up to present an opening on 'OP and the programme'. The example was used of the weekly 'Party Notes' column in this paper. Under instruction from the PCC, this is produced by a Party member, drawing from discussions on this leading body and other debates in and around the Party. It is not the position of the PCC however, still less the position of the Party. It - like the Conrad draft programme - is signed by an individual and that Party official has individual responsibility for it. Hopefully, it reflects broader areas of agreement within the Party, but this does not make it a collective CPGB or PCC statement.

This was made explicit to the OP speaker in excruciating detail - "Short of drawing little pictures for you", I told him, "I don't know how to make it any clearer" (Tape of London seminar, September 8). Yet OP are compelled to continue to peddle this conscious piece of dishonesty. Why?

Put simply, they must. The implication is that there is a certain sectarian symmetry in our actions. Having said the programme would be adopted by a reformed Party's congress, we then produce a Party programme (despite all our protestations to the contrary). *Ipsa facto*, we are suffering from delusions of grandeur. We believe that our small organisation is in fact the Party and are - in defiance of all that reality is telling us - adopting political forms only appropriate for an actual Party.

The one piece of 'evidence' they cited for our equation of the Conrad draft with the Party programme comes in the following passage:

"By the end of 1995, [the 'Leninist' faction of the CPGB] was no longer referring to the draft programme of the 'Leninist wing of the Party', it was referring to its draft programme as being the 'CPGB's draft programme' and that this would be 'a powerful weapon in the fight for a reformed Party'" (*Advance from vanguardism*). Readers may well wonder where this damning quote actually comes from, as OP does not see fit to cite a reference. In fact it comes from the internal Party document, *Perspectives '96*. The quoted section comes from the brief introductory remarks at the beginning of the document. Here is a fuller version of the quote:

"In the *Weekly Worker* (December 15, 1994), we wrote that 'the production of the CPGB's draft programme in the 75th year of its existence ... will be a powerful weapon in the fight for a reformed Party'. Its publication is undoubtedly a step forward for our Party" (*Perspectives '96*, p1).

Thus, we see something rather different than OP's suggestion. In fact, the section it cites actually comes from the *Weekly Worker* of December 1994, not "the end of 1995" when *Perspectives '96* were written. What is the significance of this?

Simply that the quote comes from the period well before the production of the Conrad draft, when serious work had hardly yet begun on it. As the task proceeded,

it was felt far more appropriate to produce it in the name of an individual. Given that the bulk of the collective work of the organisation that produced the raw material Jack was working on was from way back in 1991, we had moved forward theoretically in many areas. Plus, the world was a very different place in 1995 than in the early 1990s. The substantial changes being introduced into the text by the leading comrade charged with its production meant that it should now be produced under his individual name.

True, the *Perspectives '96* passage is clumsy. It should have referred to the 'Conrad draft', not used the ambiguous phrase "its publication". This offers the opportunity for the maliciously mischievous amongst us to confuse the Conrad version with "the CPGB's draft" and then draw all sorts of fantasy conclusions from it.

I should emphasise however that this draft is a document to be discussed, debated and amended with the intention of it being the best possible draft we can compile for the Party of the future. Our work around this draft is an important part of the fight to reforge our Party on a Leninist basis. This is the central aim of our organisation to which everything else is subordinated.

## ■ Fundamentals

OP's cardinal position is that it "supports the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism ... It defines these principles as the political and organisational principle of democratic centralism, the principle of the leading role of the party and the dictatorship of the proletariat and the principle of proletarian internationalism" (*Open Polemic* No2 - undated).

With their headlong flight from the Communist Party, the revisionists of OP have started to qualify this bloodcurdling avowal of revolutionary orthodoxy. Now, after their wounding experience in the ranks of the Communist Party, they believe it "questionable" whether democratic centralism is an "appropriate" form of communist organisation for this pre-Party stage. After all, the PCC was guilty of "persistent entanglement" of the process of communist rapprochement with "its own democratic centralist process in a 'Party' which was, supposedly, yet to be reformed" (*Open Polemic update*, November 1996).

Elsewhere in this supplement, we illustrate the crass dishonesty of this. OP members joined the Communist Party with the mutual understanding that the rights and duties entailed in Party membership applied equally to all. OP's formal letter of application of August 24, 1995 listed those of their comrades who wished to "apply for membership of the CPGB" (my emphasis). The transformation of the status of these comrades into peculiar "representational members" was precipitated by the disciplined communist practice of our organisation, set at a pace by the Party majority that OPers - used to the rather more dozy tempo of 'official communism' - found too painful.

All of this is obvious. Yet in its hypocritical attacks on our organisation, OP is being forced by the opportunist logic of its argument to attack not simply our practice, but the very idea of democratic centralism itself.

Thus, they have suggested that before the Party is reformed, centralism within a revolutionary organisation is the appropriate organisational form. Democratic centralism can only be something that the refounding congress of the Party itself can choose to adopt.

Indeed, having casually slipped

on democratic centralism in a 'relaxed' moment - like a comfy pair of slippers, perhaps - if the going then gets tough, the Party can then actually choose to "suspend" it as its organising principle and 'revert' to 'centralism'!

OP thus illustrates it has no understanding of democratic centralism as a dialectical process, a living dynamic between centralism and democracy. Instead, taking democratic centralism as a fixed category, a formal inventory of rigid democratic relationships between higher and lower committees in the Party, it ends up suggesting that the communist parties of the world - including the Bolsheviks - never actually operated democratic centralism. Instead, at best the world communist movement lurched from a form of organisational centralism, to 'leader centralism' in the early to mid-1920s.

Of course, there is little logical consistency in OP's position. It supports democratic centralism as one of its fundamental principles; indeed it is one of the entry 'requirements' for its perverse version of 'communist rapprochement'. Yet this principle of communist organisation must wait until the unspecified future, when the Communist Party has actually been reformed. This is because - according to OP - there is a Chinese wall between the way we organise now and what will be "appropriate" in the future Party.

A leading member of OP was pressed on this idea in a CPGB London seminar on November 10. Democratic centralism would certainly not flower in the full sense before the Party was reformed - this was conceded to him. But then, this holds equally true for OP's other "principles". Proletarian internationalism was taken as an example.

Lenin defined this as "working wholeheartedly for the development of the revolutionary movement and revolutionary struggle in ones own country, and supporting (by propaganda, sympathy and material aid) this struggle, this and only this line in every country without exception" (VI Lenin, *CW*, Vol 24, p74).

Clearly, during this embryonic stage of the reforming of the Party and the world movement, our internationalism cannot be on the same qualitative level as when we have a genuine Party in this country, or indeed when that Party is an integral part of a world Party of proletarian revolution, a reformed Third International.

Does this mean that until that time, proletarian internationalism is not "appropriate" for us? That in effect communists must be national-centric philistines, unconcerned with the struggle internationally?

Of course, OP would bluster at such a suggestion. They can afford to. Platonic adherence to its version of 'proletarian internationalism' costs it nothing. It can be a sentimental gesture with no operative effects whatsoever. OP therefore has no problem about affirming that proletarian internationalism is a principle that operates in the here and now.

Democratic centralism is rather different, of course. Recognising that democratic centralism was necessary now would have direct material effects on the life styles of the tired revisionists of OP. Thus, it must become what I have called one of the "extravagant promissory notes" written for the future Party - of course, one day we will all work hard, one day we will all be disciplined communists, we will all be Bolsheviks - only tomorrow, not today.

Today, apparently, is simply isn't "appropriate" ●

# Reply to OP's Jerry Spring

Submitted by **Jack Conrad**

Your letter of October 1 1996 inviting me to your conference made some extraordinary and frankly misleading claims. In the interests of Partyism, rapprochement and the truth I feel compelled to answer, if only to put the record straight.

Jerry Spring and two other OP comrades joined the Communist Party in September 1995 as "representational members". You had the same rights and responsibilities as every other member. Your comrades formed the 'For a Permanent Party Polemic Committee (faction of the CPGB)'. This important step forward for communist unity was a direct result of the campaign for communist rapprochement initiated by the Provisional Central Committee of the CPGB some nine months earlier with the publication of Jack Conrad's document, 'Party, non-ideology and faction'. All this is well known and uncontroversial.

However, in what is I think a pious attempt to blame others and absolve yourselves of responsibility, you say that OP's membership was "suspended" last year because of the PCC's "persistent entanglement of the rapprochement process with its own democratic centralist process in a 'Party' which was, supposedly, yet to be 'reforged'". Worryingly, you go on to say that "the discipline of democratic centralism should not be confused with communist rapprochement which is a coming together of comrades and the establishment or renewal of cordial relations between individuals and groups of comrades".

Comrade, you are either being dishonest or naive. It should be emphasised that none of us claim to have reformed the CPGB. With every issue of the *Weekly Worker* we repeat that "Our central aim is to reforge the Communist Party of Great Britain". Nonetheless this does not mean there cannot be Party organisations or members. There is Party organisation and there are Party members. And as you well know when you became a Party member and joined a Party organisation, we operate according to the core principle of democratic centralism: ie, freedom of criticism, unity in action.

I cannot believe that this came as a surprise to you. If it did, you must have previously been a political hermit. From the very beginning of our public existence in 1981 we openly proclaimed our commitment to Partyism, democratic centralism and the organisation of communists at the highest level possible. That is why in the original rapprochement proposal made by Jack Conrad, OP was urged to unite with us as a faction around the "disciplined communist work" of reforging the Party. Of course, it was not a matter of being positively in favour of factions or glossing over theoretical differences. "As long as factions are loyal to the Party and the Party principle, as long as all members of the Party, irrespective of faction, diligently and fully carry out agreed assignments and fulfil all their financial obligations, I believe such an arrangement provides the surest framework for the merger, the fusion of factions and the conversion of factional centres into centres that are only those of shade or trend" (*Weekly Worker* December 15 1994).

In other words democratic

centralism and rapprochement do not stand in an antagonistic relationship. They are an integral and complementary part of the ongoing Partyist process. In the 'minimal platform' agreed by the PCC and your faction of the CPGB this was explained in two very relevant formulations: "OP is a prerequisite of communist political and organisational unity" and "Communist organisation combines democracy and centralism dialectically". Cordial exchanges between individual communists and groups is a worthy aim for you to promote. But without democracy and centralism it can easily become another excuse for self-indulgent chatter. Democratic centralism is vital if we are to unite our scattered forces into a fist.

It is no secret that OP "suspended" its "representational entry" in the CPGB immediately prior to the launch of our 13th Party offensive, a Party fundraising campaign which had been fully debated and democratically agreed by Party aggregates. I ought to point out that you attended, spoke and voted at these meetings. Instead of showing the prowess and élan of your faction by militantly fulfilling your obligations as Communist Party members in this crucial action, OP ran away. You showed all the signs of blind panic.

We tried to calmly discuss your problems in our Party cell - you refused. We said, take it to a Party aggregate - you refused. We asked to speak to your editorial board - you refused. We said, continue the column in the *Weekly Worker* - you refused. We offered 'representational supporter' status, whereby you would attend and be able to speak at Party aggregates - still no reply. But your silence is eloquent.

Are you now trying to cover the dishonour OP has brought upon itself and the damage done to the rapprochement process by attempting to build a Chinese Wall between the organisation of communists today and the organisation of the reformed CPGB? If that is the case, I must warn you that it is both idealist in method and liquidationist in practice. Such dualism leads straight to anarchism. Communists - if they are really communists - seek to apply democratic centralism, even if it is only in embryonic form in the conditions of the day.

In your letter there is a list of five "principles", support for which are supposedly a requirement to attend the OP conference. They are dialectical and historical materialism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, proletarian internationalism, the leading role of the Party and, yes, democratic centralism. I say all these "principles" are a must for the here and now. Should dialectics and materialism be reserved for a reformed Party? Should proletarian internationalism await the moment when we can really deliver through a reformed Party? Of course not. Only a hopeless dogmatist or a cowardly opportunist would suggest otherwise.

What of proletarian dictatorship? From the picket line to councils of action, that can be seen in countless working class revolts against capital. In essence the same applies to democratic centralism. Even without regular congresses, elected district committees and an international leadership we can have open ideological struggle and unity in

action. Or does your sad inability to live up to communist discipline in 1995 make democratic centralism the sole exception? Comrade Spring, you appear to be set on junking this fundamental principle in practice because of factional ego. That would be a disastrous mistake.

There is still time to draw back from the abyss and reconsider. Our proposal for full factional and membership rights remains on the

table. So do the alternatives of representational supporter status and the possibility of OP ending its suspension of representational entry. If we are honest about the past, then we can put it behind us and together we can face the future with confidence. With good will on both sides I am sure progress around rapprochement can be resumed. I look forward to a positive response from you and your comrades at the OP conference ●

# Democratic centralism needed now

Submitted by **Peter Manson**

Right from its establishment in 1990, OP placed democratic centralism among the essential principles which it put forward as conditions for participation in the rapprochement process. Indeed, when OP decided to accept representational entry into the Communist Party of Great Britain as a faction, among several other reservations, it cast doubt on the commitment of the CPGB and its Provisional Central Committee to democratic centralism in practice: "OP has no illusions that the 'factionalism' of the CPGB is anything other than an anarchistic form of leader centralism favouring voluntarism and bourgeois morality against the collectivism and communist morality of democratic centralism" (*OP Broadsheet* No4 1995).

You would therefore have expected the OP comrades to have been pleasantly surprised to 'discover' that this principle was in full operation within our organisation. Not a bit of it. When it came to accepting it *in practice*, the comrades were - at the end of the day - rather less enthusiastic. *OP Broadsheet* No5 1996 chronicles the sometimes antagonistic relationship between the OP faction and the Party as a whole:

"These antagonisms would not be resolved by any demand that OP representational members must automatically adhere to all majority decisions."

What was needed, the comrades argue, was the recognition of "another kind of member" and the questioning of "the practice of democratic centralism within a 'Party' which had yet to be reformed". OP concludes that "formal discipline based on majority decisions can only be exercised on the completion of the rapprochement process".

This position clearly contains difficulties. The phrase "the completion of the rapprochement process" betrays a certain formalistic thinking. The process, as understood by OP, entails intense debate around "a common theoretical programme", entirely disconnected from any real, organic class movement. It is as clear as day that this type of 'rapprochement' will never be completed. The comrades will never "resolve fundamental theoretical questions" without testing them out in practice.

Even given acceptance of the correct, dialectical relationship between theory and practice, in one sense the process of rapprochement is unlikely ever to be entirely completed. Life always throws up competing ideas which tend towards splits. There will always be loose ends.

However, the greatest contradiction in OP's formulation of 'no democratic centralism before the Party is reformed' is an obvious one. How can the Party of a new type be built unless pre-Party organisations accept the necessary discipline? It is true that mass organisations can be created through the spontaneous action of the working class. But such organisations will not produce a Communist Party, which must be built top-down.

The idea that we will be able to achieve anything of any worth through consensus decision making is utopian. Even effective bourgeois organisations accept the principle of the minority abiding by majority decisions. Action based on unanimity usually means no action at all.

Do members of the OP editorial board ever disagree on a course of action? How can they produce their publications without a degree of discipline? The larger the organisation and the more ambitious the tasks it sets itself, the more essential is membership discipline. And for communists effective discipline can only be obtained if members are persuaded of its necessity through full participation in decision making. Does OP honestly believe that the CPGB could, for example, produce the *Weekly Worker* without dedicated commitment in terms of time, effort and finance? That commitment can only be obtained through the conviction that we are moving unitedly in an agreed direction.

Does OP believe that the CPGB should abandon democratic centralism? Or does it think that it is all right for the majority of the membership, but when it comes to "another kind of member" only the democratic side of the equation should apply? In fact, for the most part OP's representational members accepted in practice the principle of democratic centralism. On more than one occasion comrade Bob Smith let it be known that he did not agree with a decision taken, but would abide by the majority - for example, the move towards the SLP. When the whole organisation was wrapped in discussion over the question of the federal republic, he encouraged me to express my disagreements with the majority, amongst whom he was numbered. He also told me that I should abide by the majority decision while continuing to voice my reservations.

OP members played an active part in many Party discussions, putting forward many proposals both in their cells and in Party aggregates. The 'Around the left' column which still appears every week

in the *Weekly Worker* was the brainchild of comrade Smith. He wrote a regular weekly polemical article on behalf of the OP faction, which also had longer articles published.

Despite all this, the comrades now say that "the ongoing question of democratic centralism finally came to a head in the particular context of PCC directives concerning the Summer Offensive of the 'CPGB'" (*Broadsheet* No5 1996, my emphasis). The Summer Offensive was the first and only occasion when the OP comrades decided they could not comply with the norms of democratic centralism. While taking full advantage of all the rights this entailed, they could not accept that they were bound by the decision - taken by a Party aggregate, not issued as a "PCC directive" - that each member must raise an agreed minimum in our annual fundraising drive. The comrades thought that the rest of the membership should be responsible for the additional finance needed to run the Party print shop and produce the *Weekly Worker*. They thought we should be grateful for any "voluntary contribution" they cared to offer.

Continuing their plea for preferential treatment, the OP comrades write: "The PCC did not even consult the OP representational faction on any question..." Apparently they expected the elected leadership to consult a group representing a tiny minority of the membership before putting forward proposals to the Party as a whole.

*Broadsheet* No5 1996 states that the present stage of rapprochement necessitates "a degree of flexibility in political organisation". It takes us to task for departing from the understanding formulated at the Fourth Congress of the Leninists of the CPGB in 1989 that until the Communist Party is reformed we "operate democratic centralism emphasising centralism based on consent". But the comrades have misunderstood this. The Fourth Congress was not saying that members were not obliged to carry out all decisions. On the contrary, it meant that the leadership must strive to win effective action through persuasion and consent rather than formal votes. Since then, with the increased size and experience of the organisation, a degree of formal democracy has been established with the monthly aggregates.

Comrades, we agree that both patience and flexibility are required. But that flexibility relates only to the form democratic centralism takes. Any number of consensus committees can be set up, but they will not take us one inch nearer our goal of a Communist Party. We will only start to make progress when we accept that the time for democratic centralism is now ●

## Democratic centralism: 'theorising' bad practice

Submitted by **Edward Main**

**D**emocratic centralism must not be postponed to an idealised future. Combining the open struggle of ideas with disciplined unity in action is indispensable to all phases of communist struggle, its form always depending on concrete conditions. Only the daily struggle to apply this fundamental principle governing the relations between communists *in practice today* can forge the democratic centralism of tomorrow's mass Party. No amount of talking can achieve this. It is a *practical* task. It means putting theory into practice.

Theory and practice form an organic unity, like it or not. While revolutionary theory strives to direct practice consciously, spontaneous practice tends towards the easy path, choosing convenience in place of necessity, and strives to drag 'theory' down to *accommodate and justify* existing practice.

OP's proposal for *democratic centralism later* is precisely an accommodation to the failure of its leaders to fulfil the communist tasks of the day as equal members of the CPGB. They complain it was "demanded of the OP representational members that they participate in *all* discussion and decision taking and abide by all majority decisions" (*Advance from vanguardism*). Yet it can hardly have come as a surprise to them that members of factions have the same rights and duties as other Party members. Jack Conrad pointed to this in 'Party, non-ideology and faction':

"As long as factions are loyal to the Party and the Party principle, as long as all members of the Party, irrespective of faction, diligently and fully carry out agreed assignments and fulfil all their financial obligations, I believe such an arrangement provides the surest framework for the merger, the fusion of factions and the conversion of factional centres into centres ... of shade or trend" (*Weekly Worker*).

In a polemic *specifically* with OP, we underlined that "as long [as factions] accept, when it comes to practice (ie, actions), majority decisions, loyal opposition can only help the rebuilding of the Party and its consolidation" ('Notes on rapprochement', *Weekly Worker* April 27 1995). The Provisional Central Committee was now "calling up pro-Party comrades in other groups to join us as full members *on the same footing as ourselves*" (*Ibid* p3, my emphasis).

When OP objected, in a letter of March 27 1995, that there would be "first class members" in political solidarity with the PCC, while others would constitute a "second class membership", we emphasised: "There will be no 'first class' and no 'second class members'. Our rules will *apply equally to all* ..." (*Ibid* p4, my emphasis). This was the principled communist basis on which three OP members joined our organisation, a position they explicitly accepted.

In what it called its "definitive response" to our invitation into the Party (letter to PCC, July 20 1995), OP accepted "a party composed of 'overt factions' may be a *historically unavoidable organisational phase* in the process of rapprochement" ("OP and the Communist Party of Great Britain", July 1995, p3). With this understanding, individual OPers would "seek *membership*" of the CPGB, then "as *members* of the Party" (my emphasis - note the absence of any reference to the notion of 'representational entry' and the organisational caste privileges this might confer on them) they would constitute themselves as a faction of the organisation (*Ibid* p3).

Clearly, there was no ambiguity in our position. It is nonsense to suggest that "in retrospect", the CPGB and OP "entered the

process of communist rapprochement with insufficient preparation" ('Advance from vanguardism'). The truth is that those individual OPers who joined our organisation had their bluff called. As Mark Fischer wrote at the time of their desertion, "all sorts of extravagant promissory notes can be written for the *future* self sacrifice and commitment" (*Weekly Worker* May 23 1996).

OP's objections to our communist norms of disciplined Party life are twofold. Firstly, insisting on democratic centralism meant that the Party majority was behaving "as though the Party was already reformed" ('Advance from vanguardism'). Secondly, it was supposed to understand that OPers were not 'ordinary' members. Special account needed to be taken of their 'representational' status.

For us in the CPGB, however, democratic centralism is not an optional extra only appropriate for the future reformed Party. It is an indispensable tool in the here and now for the building of such a Party. There was no misunderstanding with the OP comrades on this point - they simply found the daily reality of Party life too difficult. They reacted to the hard practice of our organisation - particularly its annual Summer Offensive fundraising drive - like slugs to a pinch of salt.

Thus, as Party members, they began by implicitly challenging the Party's democratic centralist norms, its serious levels of work and commitment. As they descended further into the Menshevik morass, they began to theorise this petty, degenerative posing. As "representative members" of the CPGB, having enjoyed all the rights of membership they ran away from the duties. In retrospect, we can see them as fallen soldiers trying to present a low level desertion as having some sort of 'honour', as a necessary extension of their fight for a reformed Party.

Thus, in *OP update No4* (October 1996), they write that their bruising experience in the CPGB has "raised the question as to whether the process of communist rapprochement ... [can] succeed within an established vanguardist organisation without a transitional form of political organisation being put into place" (p3). Concretely, the 'transitional form' proposed is a Communist Rapprochement Committee, whose distinctive feature is that "all members of the committee should have the unquestioned right not to participate in majority action with which they have particular, principled disagreements" (*Advance from vanguardism*).

Mark Fischer, in his 'Party notes' column (*Weekly Worker* September 12 1996), rightly called this "shamefaced Menshevism ... in effect a call for the liquidation of our organisation, in order in some way to aid 'communist rapprochement'" (*Ibid*). OP mused about whether this was a "deliberate attempt to create confusion" (*Update* No4, p3). Comrade Fischer's "ploy" - apparently - was to use this "not as one of the proposals for the forming of a Communist Rapprochement Committee, but as a proposed principle for inclusion in the political organisation of the CPGB! On this basis he peddles the nonsense that OP is calling for "the liquidation of your organisation, in order in some way to aid 'communist rapprochement'" (*Ibid*).

Comrade Fischer was quite correct, however. Having joined the highest level of communist organisation in Britain, the OP leaders tried to water down its practice, to introduce non-communist inner party norms and pleaded for special status instead of equality. Having deserted, they are proposing a lower level of organisation than that already achieved - a barrier, not a bridge on the road to a reformed Communist Party ●

The CPGB has published a book discussing the question of democratic centralism. This was written after a fierce battle in the organisation over the question in 1993.

A minority claimed the Party was dominated by a "bureaucratic clique" that strangled initiative and was causing a creeping sclerosis of the entire organisation.

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