

The struggle for communism

Yesterday, today and tomorrow

THE CALL in the *Weekly Worker* for “all communist forces to come together for broader, higher and more disciplined communist work” is a welcome stimulus for all genuine communists. You are to be congratulated for issuing such a call and opening the pages of the *Weekly Worker* to facilitate this process.

1. The Communist Party - myth or reality?

Few can fail to recognise the current fragmentation and lack of influence of communists. To address this crisis, we must have an honest appraisal of the situation. Since you see the most immediate problem as organisational - the need for a united communist party - let us make that our starting point.

You declare, in your ‘Party, Non-Ideology and Faction’:

“We want to give the possibility of returning the Party to all communists. We earnestly call the pro-Party diaspora back to the Party. Surely it is time for them, if they are serious, to return to their Party. Unite with the continuation of the Party, represented by the Provisional Central Committee and the Party organisations which accept its leadership. It is either that or isolation, localism and effective death as any sort of communist.”

In order for any “worker and serious left organisation” to establish meaningful unity, the very first point of agreement that has to be reached is on living reality. The Party does not exist! We do not raise this subject for cheap point scoring. We, in the RWT, see this as a hard won lesson, having our origins in another self-proclaimed ‘Party’, the Cliffite SWP. We recognise that the infant CPGB was the only Marxist organisation in the UK which constituted a workers’ party. The struggle to form a communist workers’ party was a huge step forward. The CPGB contained many genuinely revolutionary workers. However, even in its earliest days, there were bureaucratic tendencies, shown, for example, in the witch-hunting of John Maclean, the closure of the *Workers’ Dreadnought* and the expulsion of Sylvia Pankhurst. The CPGB then began a long and painful degeneration.

Now even you accept that the old CPGB was on its death bed, under the blows of a “thousand opportunist cuts”. It is surely time to burn the carcass of what long ago ceased to be a workers’ party. Then we can establish a level playing field to begin the necessary construction work afresh. Yet you are retarding this development in a number of ways.

First, you have set up the CPGB as the “highest achievement of the British working class” without which the “working class is nothing”. In so doing, you have turned the CPGB into a rigid absolute category. Such fetishisation of organisational forms

The Republican Worker Tendency replies to Jack Conrad’s ‘Party, Non-ideology and Faction’

was alien to Marx and Marxism. Marx categorically opposed the Belgian Socialist Party’s efforts to reforge the First International Workingmen’s Association, in 1880, saying: “Doctrinaire anticipations of the programme of action for revolution in the future only divert us from the struggle of the present ... It is my conviction that the critical juncture for a new International Workingmen’s Association as not yet arrived, and for this reason I regard all workers’ congresses, particularly socialist congresses, in so far as they are not related to the immediate given conditions, in this or that particular nation, as not merely useless but harmful. They will always fade away in stale, generalised banalities.”¹

Faction rights in a non-existent party?

Traditional revolutionary left sects are often quick to proclaim themselves a ‘Party’. The move from the Socialist Labour League to the Workers Revolutionary Party; the move from the International Socialists to the Socialist Workers Party are two examples. Alongside other criteria, a communist workers’ party must meet the minimum requirement of being recognised by a significant section of the working class as their party. Yet you proclaim the existence of the CPGB by the criterion of a family tree!

Now there is an apparent contradiction in that you say that you are not ‘the Party’. Yet the ‘What we fight for’ column in the *Weekly Worker* states: “We urge all who accept these principles to join us. A Communist Party supporter reads and fights to build the circulation of the Party’s publications and encourages others to do the same; where possible builds and participates in the work of a Communist Party Supporters Group.”

Let us be serious, comrades. How do you a join

a ‘Party’ that does not exist? How do you grant faction rights in a non-existent party? Where is the basis for unity without an agreed programme? Now if the Communist Party exists, it is in name only, for it has no deep roots or significant support for its programme in the working class. We are talking here not of a reformed party, but of a forgery of a party.

The honest recognition that there is no communist party leaves us in a much better position to view the reality of the fragmentation and division of the revolutionary left. These organisations can be characterised in a variety of ways. Those which already see themselves as “the leadership”, “the Party”, or faction of ‘a party’ (if out of favour) are essentially sects. In reality there are many tendencies within the working class movement based around programmes or schools of thought. The unity question you have posed is really one of the unity of tendencies. That is the level we are at; that is what the debate is between - revolutionary tendencies. From this honest recognition, we may then begin to address the far deeper issue before us, the job of redefining genuine communism to meet the challenge of the world at the end of the 20th century.

2. Building a new communist workers’ party

You state that your “central aim is to reforge the Communist Party of Great Britain. Without this Party the working class is nothing; with it, it is everything.” This is very reminiscent of the saying of the Second International revisionist, Bernstein, that, “Socialism is nothing, the movement everything”. After more than a century’s world-wide experience, there can be no separation between communist organisation today and the

goal of communism. It is something which is glaringly missing from your whole “rapprochement”, in effect, erecting a barrier between theory and practice. The RWT calls for the breaking of this barrier which acts as an impediment to any serious regroupment. We must address our past, our present and our future.

The work of building a communist workers’ party, as a component part of a communist International, varies according to the modes of production, class structure and political system in each country. Within the UK, capitalism has long prevailed, leading to a more homogeneous class structure, with a numerically preponderant working class. The fact that the UK has been a major imperialist power has permitted the considerable development of a middle class and a large aristocracy of labour. This has helped the ruling class to come to terms with the working class’s numerical weight.

The bourgeoisie has transformed the Labour Party into its favoured organisation for corrupting and disorganising the working class. They were helped by that sector of the middle class formed from the trade union and Labour Party bureaucracies and the management layer of national and local state agencies. They have actively encouraged the formation of the labour aristocracy through petty privileges, career avenues and outright corruption. They have promoted a deep penetration of social democratic ideas amongst the working class. This, married to the conservative road of capitalist development in the UK, arising from the defeats of the Levellers in 1649, the United Irishmen in 1798 and the Chartists in 1849 (all with long-term consequences for the UK), has greatly restricted the political development of our class.

However, through the periodic crises of capitalism, sections of the labour aristocracy can become radicalised: eg, engineers at the turn of the century; teachers today. Furthermore, there is always the danger for the ruling class that the most oppressed sections of our class will take up social, economic and political struggle. There are ideologies in reserve for disciplining and disorganising those sections of the working class the right social democrats cannot reach in such circumstances. To rein in these two groups of workers there are two main variants of radical ideology:

a) Left reformist social democracy: eg, the Labourism of *Tribune*, Benn, Livingstone, the Socialist Campaign Group.

b) Revolutionary social democracy or middle class Marxism. This is a systematic corruption of Marxism, in the guise of Marxism. In the UK it appears in a variety of forms: eg, the old CPGB and the remnants from the wreckage; the various Trotskyist internal or external factions of the Labour Party - Socialist Action, Workers Power, Militant Labour and the Socialist Workers Party.

The boundaries between left reformism and revolutionary social democracy are fluid. Militant Labour is a good example of an organisation that uses Marxist rhetoric to cover a left reformist programme. The British Labour Party has been the main vehicle for ensuring this constant slippage from revolutionary to reformist social democracy and accommodation to the liberal bourgeoisie. The Labour Party has also integrated sections of the middle class and working class into the UK political system - a constitutional monarchy ruling over a multinational imperial state. A major component of both reformist and revolutionary social democracy is their common British unionism. They both support 'a British road to socialism'.

The fundamental divide between revolutionary social democracy and genuine communism, however, is what happens after the seizure of power. For revolutionary social democrats want to manage or reform capitalism, whilst genuine communists wish to transform all social relations. When it comes to the construction of a communist society, social democracy, disguised as Marxism, is a harbinger of defeat.

It is for this reason that the RWT sees the job of building a communist pole of attraction in the UK today as not merely one of organisational unity, but the need to carry out a thorough defeat of 'revolutionary reformism' or revolutionary social democracy. This division is not merely one of organisationally fragmented revolutionaries, but of clashing programmes. It is a class division.

3. 'What is communism?' cannot be dismissed as a mere 'historical question'

For revolutionary social democracy, the principle vantage point from which to assess the current situation is the collapse of the USSR. Left reformist social democracy concentrates on the demise of 'clause four socialism' within the Labour Party. Now, without underestimating the significance of these events, it must be said these measuring points tend to reveal more about the nature of the left itself. The real source of the current crisis of the communist movement goes much deeper - to the defeat of the international revolutionary wave of 1916-1921. Those who would attempt to brush aside matters of fundamental importance arising from past struggles and relegate them to mere 'historical questions' are consigning communism to a distant utopia.

A good example of this is the attitude of your partners, the Revolutionary Democratic Group, who state that "Capitalism existed in Russia before 1917 and exists in 1995". So what existed for over 70 years has no bearing on communists today! This casual writing off of the experience of hundreds of millions of workers, from Berlin to Beijing and from Havana to Hanoi, hardly shows a very internationalist attitude. Neither does it provide a very convincing answer to those countless workers here, whose first response to meeting a communist is, 'Go back to Moscow!' Lurking beneath the attempt to suppress the recent experience of our class is the desire to uphold revolutionary social democracy against genuine communism.

In contrast, Karl Marx argued:

"Proletarian revolutions ... constantly engage in self-criticism and in repeated interruptions of their own course. They return to what has apparently already been accomplished in order to begin the task again; with merciless thoroughness they mock the inadequate, weak and wretched aspects of their first attempts."²

To brush history aside would be to accept Francis Fukuyama's proclamation that indeed we have reached "the end of history". No, we need an application of dialectics to these problems in order to reach a restatement of communism for today.

Second International abandons Marx's communism

The traditional view of the failure of classic social democracy is first a moral one - that its parties supported the First World War and secondly, it reduced socialism/communism to a utopian future, through its separation between minimum and maximum programmes. This view remains today and it is purposefully limited. Social democracy had a view of a future socialist society which was profoundly compromised by the specific phase of capitalist imperialism it grew up with. The law of concentration and centralisation of capital, Marx outlined in *Capital*, very much impressed the theorists of the Second International. It seemed that capitalism was doing the work of socialists for them!

For rightists, like Bernstein, this itself justified the evolutionary road. However, centrists, such as Kautsky and Hilferding, were also adherents of the view that capitalism was working for them! Kautsky's notorious theory (outlined just before the First World War!) that ultra-imperialism was making inter-imperialist war obsolete, is just one example of this thinking. For centrists, all that was required was for social democracy to take over the running of this capitalist legacy and place it under full state control. However, even revolutionary social democrats were affected by this way of thinking. Whilst they said an insurrection was needed to defeat the old ruling class, the job of the victorious workers' state or party was not to uproot all capitalist social relations, but to further centralise and manage capitalism on behalf of the workers.

The concept that socialism equals nationalisation was in the blood of both the reformist and revolutionary wings of the Second International. For Marx, however, increased socialisation of production did not amount to socialism as a new society. It marked the spread of capitalist relations as earlier forms of production were uprooted. It was through this socialised labour process that workers ended up owning little but their labour power. Social democracy saw and was impressed by capitalism's growth. It was largely blind to the alienated human beings within this process. The growth of trusts, syndicates and cartels was viewed positively, as an increase in socialisation. Out of this view grew a model of socialism based on capitalist productive relations, accepted by both the reformist and many on the revolutionary wing of social democracy. This ignored the fact that increasing socialisation only changed the form by which private, collective and state capitalists ruled over and disposed of labour.

We can see how much this concept of 'state socialism' held sway through contrasting shades of opinion within classical social democracy:

"This means nothing other than that our generation has had placed before it the problem of transforming, with the help of the state, with the help of consciously applied methods of social regulation, the present-day economy organised and led by the capitalists, into an economy administered through the democratic state."³

Now most ardent 'Marxist-Leninists' will cry in outrage that Lenin and the Bolsheviks were revolutionaries who argued that the existing capitalist state could not transform society. Indeed they did advocate and implement the armed smashing of the Tsarist state and its replacement by a new agency of power - the Soviets. However, what was this new power to do to bring about the construction of a communist society? The programme that was implemented was modelled upon the example of the highest levels of state capitalism. Even in Lenin's most path-breaking work, *State and Revolution*, we can see his break with social democracy was incomplete. It still exerted a powerful influence on his vision of post-revolutionary society:

"A witty German Social Democrat ... called the postal service an example of the socialist economic system. This is very true. At present the postal service is a business organised on the lines of a state-capitalist monopoly. Imperialism is gradually transforming all trusts into organisations of a similar type, in which, standing over the 'common' people ... one has the same bourgeois bureaucracy.

"But the mechanism of social management is here to hand. Once we have overthrown the capitalists ... and smashed the bureaucratic machine of the modern state, we shall have a splendidly equipped mechanism which can very well be set going by the united workers themselves..."⁴

This essentially social democratic vision, accepting alienated labour as the basis for future production, is hardly likely to inspire workers today!

Now it is clear that the Bolshevik Party was very much divided, if not in the dark, as to its exact aims after the seizure of power. However, increasingly the view that the lower phase of communism amounted to state nationalisation very much gained hegemony over the Revolution. Furthermore, this lower phase became a separate stage, or barrier between socialism and communism.

Reorganising capitalism or uprooting the law of value?

What was lost early on in the revolution was an emancipatory view of the economic content of the lower phase of communism. The distorted social democratic definition of capitalism as anarchy and 'market chaos' and socialism as state planning and control, already evolving through the centralisation of capital itself, influenced their concept of the very essence of the communist revolution. Marx showed clearly that capitalism

was not a system of mere management and control but a system of production and distribution, based on the extraction of surplus value through the rule of the law of value.

For Marx the essence of capitalism is the reduction of the worker to a wage slave, possessing nothing but her/his labour power, which s/he is forced to sell. Workers are alienated from the product which embodies surplus value, used by its owner/s to take control over the production process.

"Hence the rule of the capitalist over the worker is the rule of things over man, of dead labour over living, of the product over the producer."⁵

Alienation is the most fundamental contradiction, arising from the rule of the law of value, which must be overcome. The whole idea of the transition to genuine communism is of a total transformation of social relations of production, most notably through the uprooting of the law of value.

Marx stated that his original contribution to political economy had been his exposition of the dual nature of labour under capitalism as an activity and a commodity. Opposed to the commodity fetishisation of capitalism, where relations between people appear as relations between things, Marx championed the "free association of producers".

Who shall transform the economy?

Karl Kautsky, however, saw the agent of communist construction not in the self-determination of the working class but in the "bourgeois intelligentsia":

"Indeed modern economic science is as much a condition for socialist production as, say, modern technology, and the proletariat can create neither the one nor the other, no matter how much it may desire to do so; both arise out of the modern social process. The vehicle for science is not the proletariat, but the bourgeois intelligentsia."⁶

This degrading view of the worker, held by classical social democracy, stood in sharp contrast to that of Marx himself:

"Just as economists are the scientific representatives of the bourgeoisie, so the socialists and communists are the theorists of the proletariat. As long as the proletariat is not sufficiently developed to constitute itself as a class, as long therefore as the struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie has not acquired a political character, and while the productive forces are not yet sufficiently developed, within bourgeois society itself, to give an indication of the material conditions necessary for the emancipation of the proletariat and the constitution of a new society, these theorists remain utopians who, in order to remedy the distress of the oppressed classes, improvise systems and pursue a regenerative science. But as history continues, and as the struggle of the proletariat takes shape more clearly, they have no further need to look for a science in their own minds; they have only to observe what is happening before their eyes, and to make themselves its vehicle of expression."⁷

The dominant political practice of post-revolutionary Bolshevism followed the Kautsky/social democratic model of 'state socialism', with the operation of the law of value. It was inevitable this would come into conflict with the proletarian power of the workers' councils.

The traditional revolutionary left refuses to seek the roots of the 'collapse of communism' in the social democratic model implemented in the early USSR, in the teeth of workers' opposition. They look instead to the struggles of political 'titans' - Stalin and Trotsky. This can only be described as an idealistic view of history, with more in common with Nietzsche than Marx.

The revolutionary Lenin had written:

"What is most important to us is to enlist all the toilers to a man in the government of the state. Socialism cannot be introduced by a minority, a party"⁸

Instead of the uninterrupted revolutionary process of the transformation of capitalism, through the lower to the upper phase of communism, we saw the pull backwards towards stagism. The tasks of developing a 'state capitalist' economy became the new stage retarding the lower phase of communism. It became for Lenin a question of the state governing until the workers "have learned to govern the state themselves".

So we can read in Lenin's *Immediate tasks of the Soviet government* that the "unquestioning submission to a single will is absolutely necessary for the success of the labour processes that are based on large scale industry..."⁹

Already, in the spring of 1918, we can see the emerging contradiction between the social democratic view of communism and that of genuine communism. The Bolshevik, Osinsky,

issued a prophetic warning:

"We stand for the construction of the proletarian society by the class creativity of the workers themselves, not by ukases from the 'captains of industry' ... We proceed from trust in the class instinct and in the active class initiative of the proletariat. If the proletariat itself does not know how to create the necessary prerequisites for the socialist organisation of labour - no one can do this for it. No one can compel it to do this. The stick, if raised against the workers, will find itself either in the hands of another social force... Socialism and socialist organisation must be set up by the proletariat itself, or they will not be set up at all; something else will be set up - state capitalism."¹⁰

4. International revolutionary wave and the Bolshevik revolution, 1916-21

It is not our intention to duplicate the many works written on the history of the international revolutionary wave and of the USSR. Instead, what can we learn to help us work out a definition of communism as an emancipatory alternative to capitalism today? It is now almost eighty years since the 1917 revolution, a greater time span than between the 1848 revolutions and the Paris Commune of 1871, or between 1871 and 1917. Each of these periods led to huge theoretical, programmatic and organisational changes in the international workers' movement.

The Paris Commune superseded the First International; The Third Communist International was set up because of the capitulation of the Second Socialist International in the First World War. Now is it not glaringly obvious, after a longer period of even greater change, that the Third International can no longer be the model on which today's communists seek to organise ourselves?

Most importantly, in the USSR, attempts were made to "construct a communist society" which brought into practice schemas which had previously been confined to theory alone. Their failure has been imprinted on the minds of millions as the 'collapse of communism'.

The problem, which has increasingly manifested itself throughout this century, has been described by Peter Hudis as the "absolute contradiction" of the age, counterrevolution, emerging from within the revolution"¹¹. This was highlighted very well by the Croatian communist, Anton Ciliga:

"In fact each new revolution begins not on the basis from which the preceding one started, but from the point at which the revolution before it had undergone a mortal set back.

"The experience of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution places anew before the conscience of international socialism an extremely important sociological problem. In the Russian Revolution, as in two other great earlier revolutions, those of England and of France, why is it that it is from the inside that the counterrevolution has triumphed, at the moment when the revolutionary forces were exhausted, and by the means of the revolutionary party itself ('purged', it is true, of its leftwing elements)?"¹²

It is therefore vital that we draw out what is negative and positive for today, from the experience of the international revolutionary wave and Russian Bolshevism. We must seek out the seeds of an alternative at the time.

To find these, we have to examine not only the writings and actions of the purges or those reacting to the defeat afterwards. We must look to the actions and buried words of the defeated and perjured 'leftwing elements'. For too long the traditional revolutionary left has preferred to smooth over the point of defeat and separation of the working class from the 'revolutionary' Party and Soviet state. Those who want to silence the many Bolsheviks, anarchists and other revolutionaries, who fought at Kronstadt in 1921, against such a separation, are today hiding from our class that they would perform exactly the same role tomorrow. There is a connection between the view that 'the Party's' existence can be defended today, divorced from any significant section of the working class, and the reality of a Party-state tomorrow, ruling over the working class.

1921 - Kronstadt, factions and statism

When dealing with the historical situation in 1921, the CPGB-PCC looks through narrow empirical eyes, seeing only a one-sided conclusion of the results of 1921. In terms of the resulting ban on factions in the CPSU, you accept, without criticism, all the excuses of the time, that it was an

“emergency measure”. A dialectical view sees the full picture. Social democratic ‘communism’ had finally gained the upper hand, leading to the emergence of counterrevolution from within.

After all, 1921 was no less an emergency than the height of the Civil War. By 1920/1 workers had been placed under one-man management or even conscripted. Trotsky and others were advocating the full militarisation of labour. The Red Army had previously waged a popular defence of the republic against the Whites, but now demoralisation was widespread. Despite all the sacrifice, the Red workers and soldiers had seen their power disintegrate.

Taking this as our vantage point, we can then assess where, within the defeated revolution, were the seeds of an alternative path. Can this then provide us with our point of departure for reclaiming communism today?

It cannot be helped that the Kronstadt Rising was lauded by reactionaries and bourgeois liberals. After all, the German high command initially welcomed the outbreak of the Russian Revolution and gave assistance to Lenin and other revolutionaries. In both cases the attitudes of normally hostile forces have been used to misrepresent the real nature of the events themselves. The goal of those actually fighting at Kronstadt was to defend the system of workers’ councils and the gains of 1917, which revolutionary Bolshevism had then represented. The Bolshevik leaders knew that Kronstadt was not the work of ‘White generals’. In crushing the revolt they themselves brought about the counterrevolution within the revolution. It is against this background that we see the inevitable banning of the Workers’ Opposition, Democratic Centralists and all factions. In reality, this was the destruction of the revolutionary Bolshevik Party itself and marked the absolute separation of the Party from the international revolution and from our class. International communism gave way to national Bolshevism; working class power finally gave way to that of the bureaucrats.

In 1921 very few saw the far reaching consequences of these events. To her great credit, Sylvia Pankhurst was one of the few within the infant CPGB to do so. Her opinions still bear down on those now seeking to reforge the manacles of that Party. Following the international conference in Berlin, called by the Communist Workers’ Party of Germany, on the need for a new International, she noted:

“Its conclusions appear to us irrefutable, though one may not be able to refrain altogether from regret that the Third International has through force of circumstances developed along lines which have caused it to become the defender of Soviet Russia, rather than the champion of the world revolution...”¹³

Pankhurst was expelled from the CPGB and witch-hunted. We cannot dismiss this gulf in the communist movement as a mere ‘historical question’. The RWT argues that it is here we see the culmination of a living conflict over the nature of communism itself - that of the social democracy, communism as the job of administrators; and that of genuine communism, implemented by the working class itself.

The legacy of defeat

Why is it so important for the whole of the traditional revolutionary left to suppress the real nature of the struggle at Kronstadt? It should be clear that the traditional revolutionary left is defending the rule of the socialist administrator and a model of communism/socialism bequeathed by national Bolshevism, the social democratic corruption of genuine communism. 1914 did not mark a final break with social democracy. The defeat at Kronstadt gave social democracy a new life. This prepared the ground for the later emergence of statified forms of capitalism across the globe during the great depression. This has exerted an immense pull on the working class movement as well as greatly strengthening the social democratic corruption of Marxism. This explains why many of those who celebrate the political break after 1914 are still being dragged down by this social democratic legacy that crept back after 1921. It also helps to explain why the so-called ‘collapse of communism’ in 1989 has effected the whole of social democracy, not merely the former communist parties.

Now, we presume that the CPGB-PCC does not dismiss the break between the Second and the Third Internationals as a mere ‘historical question’, no longer of any significance. After all, that would rather disarm you, when confronting your former Party comrades and the Trotskyist sects, which form the various internal and external factions of the Labour Party. Yet a genuine communist alternative cannot be built today, unless we

recognise 1921 as another definitive break in our tradition, this time one where social democracy, in the form of national Bolshevism, triumphed over genuine communism.

However, it is precisely here that you muddy the water. “The theoretical differences that at present divide us should not, as I have said, be glossed over.” However, ‘communist’ unity should prevail. Therefore, “Communists might not exactly agree on the nature of the former USSR”. Maintaining unity on this basis is to leave communism handcuffed to social democracy and confine us to a capitalist prison, even after the revolution.

We are talking here about the very nature of communism itself. We must reconstitute, not falsify Marx. In the *Weekly Worker* you put an emphasis on the importance of uniting together those from different traditions. However, upon closer examination, most of these ‘different traditions’ already have something in common, a social democratic or statist view of communism.

The SWP, who uphold a theory of state capitalism, cannot get beyond a vision of state capitalism with a human face (ie, capitalist production relations presided over by a soviet state). The lower phase of a communist society is transitional, partly reflecting the capitalist past and increasingly representing the communist future. Change this transitional society into a new stage, ‘international socialism’, as the SWP does, and there is no longer any conscious force ensuring the full transition to the upper phase of communism. Just as classic Second International social democracy left it to the growth of the productive forces to prepare the transition to socialism, so post-1921 revolutionary social democrats leave it to the growth of productive forces to bring about full communism. In effect, communism is relegated to a utopian future. As a result the new transitional society goes into reverse. The socialism it represents is no longer the lower phase of communism, but the ‘highest stage’ of capitalism.

For SWP theorist Alex Callinicos, like Karl Kautsky and all those after him, the problem is the workers themselves.

“Lacking any conception of an alternative society to capitalism, workers focus on narrowly economic struggle ... They thus lack the essential revolutionary consciousness.”¹⁴

All that is needed is for the socialist specialists and administrators to lead them!

There is frankly no need to fully address the lack of alternative provided by Trotsky and his followers. No other communist leader has contributed more to strengthening the hold of statism over the Marxist left than Trotsky. He completely fetishised statified property relations in his universal category, ‘Nationalisation equals workers state’, despite the prevailing production relations and even if the workers have no control.

In the UK, the nationalisation programmes of reformist and revolutionary social democracy found a comfortable relationship in the Labour Party. Yet the real dividing line between social democrats and communists is not whether you are in or out of the Labour Party, or whether you uphold or reject clause four socialism; it is whether you reject the social democratic and statist model in its entirety, and champion an emancipatory communism developed from Marx’s original outline and our class’s experience.

5. Which road?

There have been two ‘Party’ initiatives in the current situation. The Workers Revolutionary Party plunged itself into the defence of clause four, the better, after its scrapping, to prepare for the regroupment of clause four socialists in a new ‘party’ outside the Labour Party. No moves towards communism here, just a stale rehash of left social democracy.

The other initiative has been your own, communist unity to “reforge the CPGB”. The question that we pose to you is - in what way does this process free communism from the manacles of social democracy? An examination of your own vision of communism shows that you are still imprisoned within the social democratic framework.

Critique of the CPGB Draft Programme

The main thrust of this article has been around what we see as the fundamental principles dividing genuine communists from social democrats and communism from state capitalism. We are not attempting to create differences with you, but to show our differences are real and where they have a bearing both on our vision of communism and

on our immediate programmes which flow from this.

Central to the unity of any communist party is its programme. This should precede organisation. Democratic centralism cannot operate without an agreed programme. It is the implementation of the programme which centralises the party and makes it cohere. Programme-less ‘democratic centralism’ is merely a facade behind which today’s ‘party’ apparatchiks rule. The SWP offers a classic case of this.

So how does the CPGB’s programme measure up? We shall base our critique on your Draft Programme.

a) The lower phase or stage of communism?

“Finally in this section comes the transition from the first stage of communism, socialism, which begins with the revolution and lasts until full communism.”¹⁵

This concept of socialism as a separate “first stage of communism” was never Marx’s description. In his *Critique of the Gotha programme* Marx mapped out his views of a lower and higher phase of communism. He saw a dialectical relationship between these phases. It is possible to ‘phase in’ and ‘phase out’, in a transition from outgoing capitalism to incoming communism, but it is impossible to ‘stage in’ and ‘stage out’. The separate stage of socialism has, in effect, become a wall raised between capitalism and communism, the main feature of which is complete nationalisation or state capitalism. You recognise the transition can be reversed. Separate stages will guarantee it.

b) The threat of bureaucracy and the state

“For democracy. Why a bureaucracy will be necessary? How will it be controlled and supervised?”¹⁶

It was often a viewpoint in the old *Leninist* that the “bureaucracy must become the servant of the working class”. This viewpoint is a massive concession to social democracy and sows the seeds of the very danger posed above. There will be no necessity for a bureaucracy in the lower phase of communism. The existence of a bureaucracy as an intermediate entity contradicts the basic prerequisite for the construction of communism, even in its lower phase. That is conscious, democratic control over the labour process and the products of labour by the workers’ councils themselves. In today’s age of statified capitalism, with its vast bureaucratic army of managers, specialists, and consultants, etc, it is a life or death struggle to erase this parasitical force. This means combating all their apologists.

c) Will we need the law of value?

“Socialism is not a mode of production. It is a transitional society between capitalism and communism, and as such contains elements of both. The law of value and the law of planning ... Why money, the division of labour, commodity production and the law of value continue to operate under socialism.”¹⁷

A contributory factor to the downfall of the USSR was its failure to begin the uprooting of the law of value. The abolition of wage labour and the wages system must be started under the first phase of communism. The CPGB-PCC’s ‘law of planning’ belongs not to Marx, but acts as a figleaf for the power of the socialist administrators.

The replacement of money as a system of distribution and exchange was not the sole property of anarchism. Marx outlined an alternative system of certificates based on labour time as measurement. For Marx the establishment of the lower phase of communism heralded the end of value production. He wrote, “Within a co-operative society based on common ownership of the means of production the producers do not exchange their products. Neither does labour employed on the products appear here as the value of these products.”¹⁸

It is then the prime task of communists to set about the immediate eradication of the capitalist relations of production which operate according to the law of value. When labour ceases to be a commodity then labour time can become the means to organise production. Furthermore, it can be instantly understood by workers themselves. “If labour time,” wrote Marx, “is the intrinsic measure of value, why should there be another external measure side by side with it?”

The RWT does not see this most important aspect of programme as some mere ‘theoretical question’. Why? - because it is imperative that communists stand for the total uprooting of capitalist society. In order to achieve that, the lower phase of communism must lead to new relations of production and distribution, which lay the basis for the consolidation of the actual rule of the workers’ councils. Not to do this will merely open the door for the stabilisation of capitalist relations, albeit under a new master.

6. How the communist future affects the immediate programme - ‘The British Road to socialism’ or ‘The break-up of the UK road to communism’?

Our vision of the future communist society has a great bearing on our programme, tactics and type of organisation today. If a largely social democratic vision of communism is applied to the economic relations of a future society, it will also determine the programme applied today. Now, classic social democracy exerted huge influence over Marxism before and after the First World War. One influential view was the concept of the progressive nature of large state formations, necessary for capitalist development, which were preparing the ground for communism.

There were vigorous debates over the national question and it was no coincidence they took place in the multinational states of the Russian Empire and Austro-Hungary. The Russian social democrats applied these theories to their own acute national question. In Lenin’s early views, so influential today, he saw the multinational states as fertile soil for the unity of the workers’ movement. Thus he wrote in 1913:

“Capitalism’s broad and rapid development of the productive forces calls for large, politically compact, united territories, since only here can the bourgeois class together with its inevitable antipode, the proletarian class, unite and sweep away all the old, medieval caste, parochial, petty national, religious and other barriers ... But while and insofar as different nations constitute a single state, Marxists will never under any circumstances, advocate either the federal principle or decentralisation. The great centralised state is a tremendous historical step forwards from medieval disunity to the future socialist unity of the whole world, and only via such a state inseparably connected with capitalism, can there be any road to socialism.”¹⁹

It should be clear that such economist thinking would have placed any ‘Marxists’ in the UK, firmly against the struggle for Irish self-determination. National self-determination presents itself as a political or democratic issue, in the struggle against oppression. Communists should be in the lead of such a struggle. Lenin’s earlier opposition to federalism and decentralisation was also in opposition to Engels’ support for a federal republic in the British Isles and Marx’s support for a commune state, points Lenin later made himself in *State and Revolution*.

Lenin’s views on the national question developed in different phases, mightily influenced by the course of the democratic struggles themselves. Nevertheless an abstract centralism and indeed a “red Russian patriotism” ran through Russian Bolshevism. The fact is Lenin’s theory remained ridden with contradictions and inadequacies. As with his vision of communism, he could never completely break free from social democratic notions.

Some of today’s ‘Brit left’ see the answer in Lenin’s less economic writings on the national question. Looking to the struggle for Norwegian self-determination at the beginning of the century, Lenin argued that Swedish social democrats were correct to support Norway’s right to secede, whilst Norwegian social democrats were correct to oppose any such separation. This ‘zero-sum internationalism’, where one position cancels out another, left the leadership of the movement for Norwegian self-determination firmly in the hands of petty bourgeois nationalists. Therefore it is not surprising that when a referendum on the form of the new Norwegian state took place, belated social democratic support for a republic was of little avail against the nationalists’ call for a constitutional monarchy.

Lenin’s position amounted to little more than the liberal democracy that even Lloyd George was capable of during the Boer War! Given that Russian Bolshevism still contained even less democratic positions on the national question than Lenin’s, it is not surprising that the 1917-21 revolution was constantly placed in jeopardy, from the Ukraine to Central Asia, by the Russian chauvinist strain within Bolshevism.

Any honest appraisal of the revolutionary break-up of the Russian Empire will show that these earlier theories, influenced by the Second International, were in practice bankrupt. They were unable to meet the challenge of the living forces of the revolution that came forth seeking

emancipation from national and social oppression. In order to win these forces for communism a radical break was required from social democracy. Those truly internationalist communists were simply unable to overcome the rising bureaucracy of reorganised capitalism with its partner, Russian chauvinism.

Later, Stalinism returned to Lenin's earlier economist position on the national question, to justify its chauvinism. Most of today's Marxists draw no lessons to be applied to the UK state or elsewhere. Instead, your current position, like the rest of the 'Brit left', draws on the legacy of social democracy.

How necessary is the United Kingdom?

A basically social democratic view informs the Draft Programme of the CPGB:

"Communists always support the organisation of the proletariat in the largest and most powerful and most centralised units. This is the requirement of proletarian internationalism."²⁰

Drawing on this principle, you view the creation of the 'British' nation as having laid the basis for a 'British' working class. History, however, has moved on. With the disintegration of the empire and the current break up of multinational states, it is clear that these "centralised units" are not, as Lenin considered, a "great historical step forward". These states have instead retarded the growth of internationalism. Those 'workers' organisations which have accepted their framework have provided a left bulwark supporting these states' continued existence.

British nationalism and the working class

The decline of the British empire and subsequent weakening of the economic power of British imperialism has had drastic consequences for the UK state. The 'British' nation and the very notion of 'Britishness' itself is in crisis. This is no coincidence, as 'Britain' is a direct product of the British empire. The notion of 'Britain' has served as a unifying factor for the imperialist British ruling class and as an ideological device to disguise the multi-nation nature of the United Kingdom. With the world-wide break-up of unionist states, the British ruling class has seen the dangers ahead. It has responded with a 'new unionism' to bolster 'Britishness' and maintain the unity of its state and class.

At the forefront of this defensive strategy has been the Downing Street declaration and framework document, stemming from the so-called 'peace process' in the 'Six Counties'. This is part of an all-UK strategy, consisting of a mixture of administrative and political devolution to reinforce the state. We can also see a resurgence in British chauvinism, racism and increased anti-democratic methods of control. This UK state has a reactionary monarchist and unionist constitution, which denies self-determination, or even any notion of popular sovereignty.

In response to this, we have seen the further development of national and social movements of a democratic and republican nature. Communists should place themselves at the head of this democratic movement. In contrast, the attitude of the CPGB-PCC is the same as the rest of the 'Brit left' - apologists for 'Britain'. That your organisation should be so easily wrong-footed by the ruling class's 'new unionism' shows just how important it is to have communist clarity on this issue. With the easy slide of one-time 'bureaucratic internationalist' communist parties into fascist nationalism, in the former USSR and Yugoslavia, the following two statements should act as a warning:

a) "The people of Britain have come together over the centuries to form one nation. However, narrow nationalism still exists as a divisive force."
b) "As a British nation, we have proved often enough that we can be an invincible people. It is no wonder that our enemies are all too anxious to split us up."²¹

The first of these is from the CPGB Manifesto for the local elections this year; the second is by John Tyndall of the British National Party! What these quotes show is just how deep British nationalism runs through the traditional revolutionary left, resulting in the most astounding common ground between such otherwise antagonistic political forces.

The 'peace process' - an acid test

The response of many to the current 'peace process' has been to tail it, not recognising the 'new unionist' objective. Your reaction to the ceasefire was symptomatic of your social

democratic theory: "Communists in particular need to examine new organisational forms with which to confront British imperialism". We agree that there is a common struggle throughout the nations of these islands. However, this is far from the abstract and ultra-unionist concept of a 'Communist Party of the United Kingdom'. Has the ruling class solved the national question in Ireland? Has national oppression ended in the 'Six Counties'? Now, there is a long, sad history of partitionist Communist Party organisation in Ireland, which your 'British road to socialism' appears to doom you to repeat.

For social democrats, revolutionary or reformist, capitalism has already established the framework for a future society. In this case it has developed the framework for the relations between the working class of the constituent nations of the UK. You seem unable to envisage the possibility of internationalism outside of frontiers established by the capitalist state!

Breaking out of the UK state

The lack of vision of those who cannot see beyond the confines of the UK constitution reveals in reality their own inability to break out of capitalist society. The inheritance of the social democratic fetish of "large states" has destroyed the capacity of today's 'Brit left' to consider the national question from a genuinely internationalist point of view. History has shown that those who spoke loudest against 'petty separatism', for 'further merging', 'socialist assimilation', etc, are expressing not internationalism, but the reactionary idea of the "progressive nature of large states". These states were not established by the working class, but in the interests of capitalism and imperialism.

History has shown that the greatest danger, although not the only one, comes from the nationalism of the oppressor/dominant nations. The importance of this question can be seen in Yugoslavia where such 'Marxist' thinkers, as the Serbian Markovic and the Praxis Group, sank into the camp of Serbian chauvinism and fascism. The defence of a multi-ethnic Bosnian nation, against a false or 'bureaucratic internationalism', now degenerated into open Serb and Croat fascism, has provided a defining line for genuine internationalists. Nor, for genuine communists, is this a question of support for Itzebegovic's largely muslim government, but for the multi-ethnic 'communities of resistance' in Sarajevo, Tuzla and elsewhere. Whichever local agent the various competing wings of imperialism back, they are all agreed on an ethnic partition, which will be a major setback for us all. When the republican Government of Spain pressed for imperialist help from France and the UK, genuine communists did not abandon their support for the working class and peasant 'communities of resistance' on the ground, confronting the forces of fascism.

Today it is the job of communists to carry through a total revolution and the means and the end of the struggle for the communist revolution are dialectically related. Just as we must prevent the reintroduction of capitalist relations by uprooting the law of value, so we must also prevent the reproduction of the national relations which characterise the old society.

7. Reclaiming communism and revolutionary organisation

The tasks of today cannot be reduced to organisation of 'the Party' alone. The current capitalist triumphalism draws renewed strength and vigour from the inability of communists to see beyond capitalist society. Every further act of retrogression is announced with "There is no alternative". For the oppressed of the world, the lack of an emancipatory alternative is like a noose around their neck. It has been strangling our movement throughout the 20th century.

Genuine communists must fill this void by working out and restating Marx's vision of communism. This task has been repeatedly neglected in favour of "building the Party". With regard to this debate, the RWT makes no separation between the Party today and future communist society. There can be no successful communist unity unless it recognises the need for a programme encapsulating the principle of the type of society we are for and an outline of how we are to achieve this.

Organisational unity - which way forward?

The RWT is not out for sect building. We are rigorously opposed to yet another organisational

solution which again becomes part of the problem. Nor are we sectarian advocates of the current division and fragmentation. As communists we must relate to the world around us. It is out of meeting the real needs of our class today, not the preaching of a future utopian programme separate from this struggle, that communism can be achieved. It is a necessity for our class that the renewal of Marxism as a liberating force takes place so communist forces are drawn together both in theory and practice. In what way can this be done without duplicating past failures?

The principled response to the current 'capitalist offensive' is through the united front. Only sectarians oppose the united front. We believe that this principle can be applied with redoubled force to overcome our fragmentation. But your apparent belief that, if you could unite the various small communist and revolutionary social democratic tendencies today, you would thereby become a 'Party', the all-too-common response of the 'Brit left': eg, the old CPGB's Liaison Committee, the old Socialist Labour League's All-Trade Union Alliance and the old International Socialists' Rank & File Coordinating Committee. This sectarian danger would still apply, no matter how formally democratic your CPGB's internal organisation was, because it would still represent no significant section of our class.

10. Some past examples

In one of his last works, Engels bemoaned the situation in England where there was no 'workingmen's party'. He saw the need to form one and break the workers from the "tail of the great Liberal Party". However, he noted something of great relevance to today:

"But no democratic party in England, as well as elsewhere, will be effectively successful unless it has distinct working class character. Abandon that and you have nothing but sects and shams. And this is even truer in England than abroad."²²

At the time, Hyndman's self-proclaimed 'Marxist' Social Democratic Federation was flourishing but neither Marx nor Engels considered it a workers' party, never mind 'Marxist'. Unfortunately few of today's 'British revolutionary Left' recognise their historical predecessor in the SDF. Instead, it is the heritage of Bolshevism that is claimed, copied and transfigured onto the UK of today. Now there are indeed lessons from the Marxists of the Tsarist empire, which are of great relevance to today's project, but not from 1903, 1912 or 1917, for that matter.

Bolshevism and the Leagues of Struggle

What is completely ignored is that the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party was not simply proclaimed. It came about through the drawing together of disparate forces over several phases of the struggle of the working class in the Russian Empire. The most important groundwork was laid by the Leagues of Struggle, built out of fragmented Marxist study circles. Lenin struggled to connect the Marxist theory developed within these circles and to apply it to the political and economic situation in Russia and to the actual tasks facing the working class. The Leagues of Struggle helped to break down an abstract 'Marxism' and connected it to the living struggles of the workers. They did not however simply join together a number of local circles or leagues, or even revolutionary tendencies together and proclaim it 'the Party'. They waged a long term struggle in the movement and amongst the class to win support for Marxism against dominant Narodnik populism.

What were the prerequisites for the final drawing together of the forces to launch a party?

"On one hand the mass workers' movement had been gaining in strength; and on the other Marxist ideas had become widespread and had decisively overpowered Narodnik ideology, winning over the progressively-minded workers."²³

In today's UK we have neither a workers' movement gaining in strength nor the spread of Marxist ideas overpowering, or even substantially challenging, our main rival - Labourist social democracy. In the Russian Empire it took a hard struggle against Narodism and Legal Marxism, through the 'united front'-based Leagues of Struggle, combined with the new confidence and consciousness amongst the working class, to lay the ground for the launch of a party.

Indeed one of the best lessons we can learn today would be the advice of Marx, when he attacked the premature Unity Congress at Gotha. The German Social Democratic legacy haunts us even today. Yet, like ourselves today, Marx did not argue, 'Better nothing and stand aloof':

"Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programmes. If, therefore it was not possible - and the conditions of the time did not permit it - to go beyond the Eisenach Programme, one should have concluded an agreement for action against the common enemy."²⁴

It was Marx's view that "the mere fact of unification is satisfying to the workers, but it is a momentary success bought too dearly". Instead Marx had advocated an "organisation for common action".

United fronts for action today and communist leagues to prepare for the future

Facing the deep current crisis within the communist movement, these historical examples show that the premature launch of another 'Party' will hinder, not advance our cause. However, it is possible for comrades to make a new beginning to overcome the fragmentation and division you rightly recognise as a major weakness. A joint commitment to building genuine united front organisations for our class, such as rank and file movements in the unions and republican united fronts to prevent a 'new unionist' stabilisation of the United Kingdom, are two examples we can offer. We are open to other suggestions.

But you are right in also wanting to increase the political weight of a specifically communist pole of attraction. That is why we suggest a communist league, dedicated to overcoming the baleful legacy of social democracy, and not least revolutionary social democracy, or social democratic 'communism'. In this league no communist tendency would be expected to give up its freedom of action. We see no reason, other than sectarianism, why a programme of common action and meaningful debate on our aims and methods, cannot be worked out.

At present there is no Party, nor is there sufficient support amongst the working class to draw together the forces to launch one. A programme of agreed common action can only be an advance from this situation. We have stated that a central aim of any new organisation must be the restating of genuine communism. A combination of united front activity and real determination to purge our movement of social democracy, could lead eventually to the situation where a genuine communist party can be formed. Before we can arrive at that situation, we need a communist league.

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