EDUCATION for Socialists

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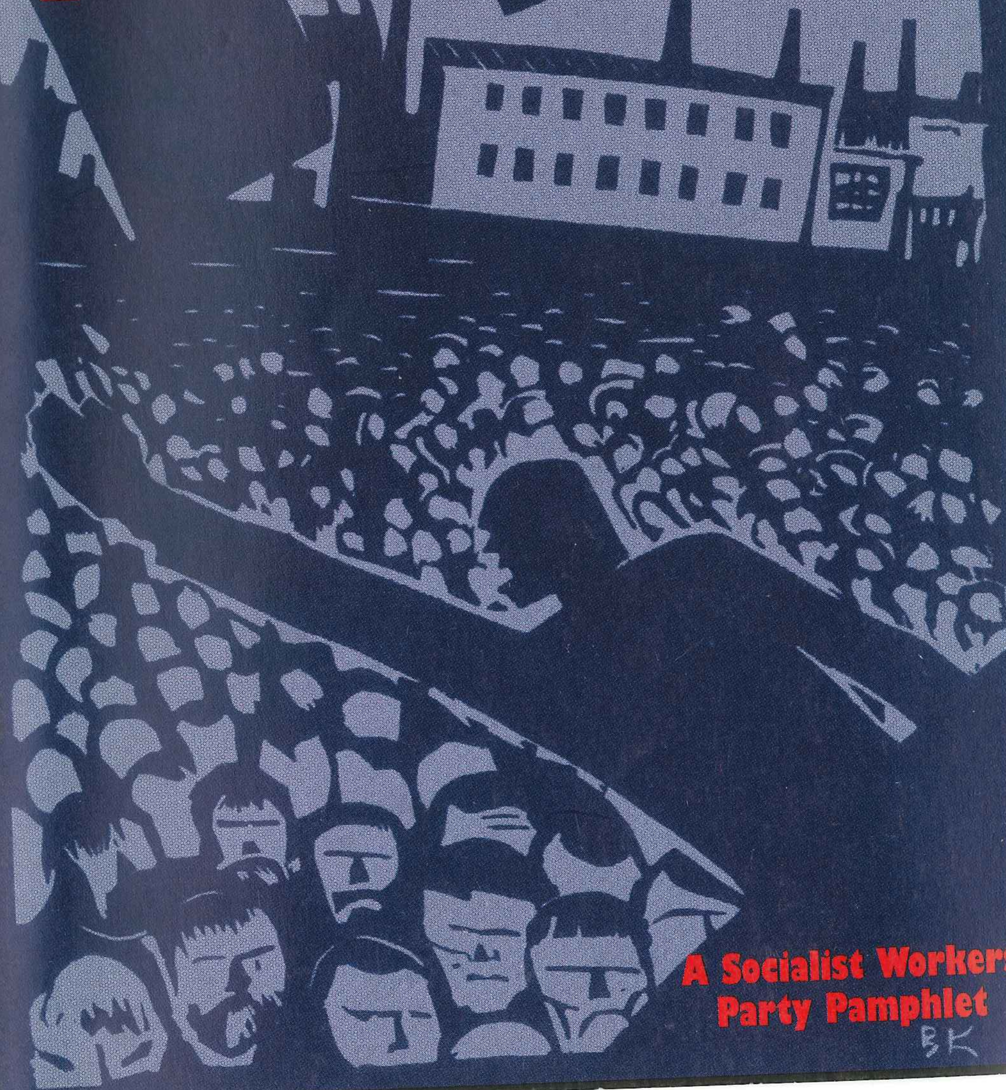
What do we mean by revolution?



A Socialist Workers Party Pamphlet

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The General Strike

CHRIS HARMAN

The idea of the general strike is nearly as old as the working class movement.

It was first elaborated in the 1830s, in Britain, by William Benbow, who was associated with the 'physical force' wing of Chartism. He propagated the call for a 'national holiday'—a cessation of work by the whole working class which, he held, would achieve a quick victory for the workers' movement. And the first experience of anything like a real general strike came soon afterwards, with the 'Plug Riots' which swept Lancashire and Yorkshire in 1842.

There was no other experience of a general strike for half a century, until the Belgian general strike for the suffrage in 1894.

But the question of the general strike has come to the fore in virtually every major upsurge of the class struggle in the 20th century. So there were general strikes in St Petersburg in October 1905, in Belfast in 1907, and in Spain in 1917. The 'year of revolution', 1919, saw a rash of general strikes—in central Germany, Berlin and Bavaria, in Seattle, Vancouver and Winnipeg, in Barcelona and in Belfast.

Further general strikes followed in Germany in 1920, Berlin in August 1923, Hong Kong and Shanghai in the mid-1920s, Britain in 1926, France in 1936, German occupied northern Italy in 1944, in East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, Belgium in 1961 and France in 1968.

The first Marxist discussion

The contrast between the 19th century and the 20th century is not accidental. The general strike is a form typical of class struggle in large scale modern industry.

It comes to the fore when the development of the class struggle has reached the point where action in one industry has an immediate impact upon every other industry and upon the state. The class struggle in such a situation can no longer be confined to individual combats with this or that employer, but has to confront the generalised power of the employing class. And that means the general strike comes to the fore with the transition from the period of 'free competition' capitalism to that of monopoly capitalism and state capitalism.

That is why the first serious Marxist discussion of the mass strike is Rosa Luxemburg's brilliant pamphlet, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions*, written in 1906.

Until then Marxists had tended to see mass strike activity as little more than a form of training which would teach workers the merits of political action.

So Engels, for instance, was absolutely scathing in his criticism of the Bakuninists for raising the slogan of the general strike in Spain in the early 1870s. He said they were calling upon the workers to sit with folded arms, while the key question was one of direct, insurrectionary activity to establish a radical republic.

In the early 1890s Engels returned to the theme. He criticised Jules Guesde, the French Marxist, for adopting the general strike slogan, and he repeated his arguments a couple of years later in a letter to Kautsky, the leader of the German socialist movement. He insisted that the general strike was a panacea proposed by people who were not prepared to confront the immediate tasks facing the working class. Instead of talking, about concrete action that was necessary, they simply spread the illusion that all you had to do was wait until the whole working class was persuaded to stop work simultaneously. Then the class enemy would collapse without struggle.

Engels' arguments were not drawn out of thin air. They were a distillation of the historical experience so far, from someone who had witnessed at first hand the struggle of the British working class in the 1840s and the revolutionary upheaval of 1848. This experience taught him that the most vital thing at every great upsurge of the workers' movement was to know how to move from humdrum, day to day economic agitation to confronting the question of state power.

In this, his arguments were not all that different to Lenin's in 1902 and 1903 when he insisted the central divide within the workers' movement was between those who saw the all-Russian insurrection as the goal, and those who avoided this central political issue.

But in some of Engels' later writings a trend can be found which became all dominating in the Marxist movement of the 1890s and early 1900s in Western Europe and North America. This was to see political action as meaning electoral activity. The 'orthodox' Marxist parties—the SPD in Germany, the Guesdists in France, the SDF in Britain, the PSI in Italy, the PSOE in Spain—all saw politics as comprising of a mixture of Marxist propaganda and electioneering, virtually ignoring struggles in the workplaces.

The Russian revolution of 1905 showed in practice how the struggles of large scale industry flow over to become directly political struggles. Economic struggles by individual sections of workers gave new confidence to other sections of workers, until people felt confident enough to raise political demands. And mass, general strike action over these political demands in turn gave still more sections of workers the confidence to fight over economic demands. The economic became political and the political economic. And at the head of the economic-political struggle arose a new form of organisation, the soviet or workers' council, which showed how the question of power could be posed in a new way (although no one saw its full significance for another 12 years).

Rosa Luxemburg's pamphlet was the first attempt to generalise these lessons from Eastern Europe to Western Europe. The discussion it provoked within the German workers' movement prefigured the great split which was to take place throughout the world workers' movement in the course of World War One—between those who stood for using the existing institutions of capitalist society to carry through reform and those who stood for fusing

industrial and revolutionary political struggle to overthrow existing institutions. (Rosa herself, however, did not see the need in 1906 to draw organisational conclusions from the division over this question, as compared with Lenin who did see the need for such a division in Russia, but not elsewhere, over the question of preparing for the insurrection.)

A specific demand

This split found organisational expression on a world scale with the formation of the Communist International, as an 'International of revolutionary action' in 1919. The theses, resolutions and manifestos of its first five congresses, from 1919 to 1922, are marked throughout by an understanding of how economic and political forms of struggle fuse in a revolutionary upsurge of the class. However, both Rosa Luxemburg and the leaders of the Communist International in its earlier years followed in Engels' footsteps in one important respect. They did not raise the slogan of the general strike at all times and under all circumstances. Rather they regarded it as a specific demand to be raised at particular, concrete points in the struggle. So, for instance, Rosa Luxemburg could write in a letter from Warsaw in January 1906:

> Everywhere there is a mood of uncertainty and waiting. The cause of all this is the simple fact that the general strike, used alone, has played out its role. Now, only a direct, all-encompassing movement in the streets can bring about a solution...

Ten days later another letter spelt out what she meant: 'The coming phase of the struggle will be that of armed *rencontres*'— the sort of insurrection that was already being attempted by the Bolsheviks in Moscow.

The same understanding of the role of the mass strike and refusal to fetishise the particular slogan of the general strike characterised the early Communist International. So there is hardly a mention of the slogan of the 'general strike' in its documents.

Drawing on the experience of these early years, Trotsky, writing in September 1934, insisted 'the world experience of the struggle during the last 40 years has been fundamentally in confirmation of what Engels had to say about the general strike'. Trotsky then went on to say that the effectiveness of a general strike depended on concrete circumstances. If the government was weak, it might 'take fright at the outset' of the strike and 'make only such concessions as will not touch the basis of its rule':

> [But] if the army is sufficiently reliable and the government feels sure of itself, if a political strike is promulgated from above, and if at the same time it is calculated not for decisive battles, but to 'frighten the enemy', then it can easily turn into a mere adventure and reveal its utter impotence.

Trotsky describes how such bureaucratic mass strikes are organised:

> The parliamentarians and the trade unionists perceive at a given moment the need to provide an outlet for the accumulated ire of the masses, or they are simply compelled to jump in step with a movement that has flared over their heads. In such cases, they come scurrying through the backstairs of the government and obtain permission to head the general strike, with the obligation to conclude it as soon as possible…

Finally Trotsky, quoting Engels, says there is 'the general strike that leads to insurrection'. But he adds, 'a strike of this sort can result either in complete victory or complete defeat.' The most important factor in determining this is whether there exists 'the correct revolutionary leadership, clear understanding of conditions and methods of the general strike and its transitions to open revolutionary struggle.'

If the struggle reaches such a stage it raises the question of power. And unless there is a leadership capable of correctly posing the question of power—of leading an assault by the working class on the institutions of the state—then the general strike backfires and the class suffers decisive defeat.

So the slogan of the general strike fits a certain point in the workers' struggle. But it is wrong to raise it as a panacea before that point is reached. That merely avoids confronting the real needs of the movement. And once the point is reached where the slogan of the general strike is correct, you have then to be ready to supplement it with other slogans that begin to cope with the question of power—demands about how the strike is organised (strike committees, workers' councils), with how the strike defends itself (flying pickets, mass pickets, workers' defence guards) and with how it takes the offensive against the state (organising within the army and the police).

There have always been those inside the working class movement who have treated the slogan of the general strike differently. Thus at the time Rosa Luxemburg wrote her *Mass Strike* pamphlet, Georges Sorel, a French intellectual who sympathised with the apolitical revolutionary syndicalists, wrote his *In Defence of Violence*.

In it he argued that the main slogan of revolutionaries at every moment had to be the 'general strike', because this was a 'myth' which educated workers about their own strength and revolutionary potential. For him, the general strike was the revolution. But it could easily be ruined if it was identified with any political aim—so he actually denounced the concrete general strikes that had occurred, like that of Belgium over the franchise and that of St Petersburg in 1905.

Such ideas continued to have a following even after the Russian Revolution of 1917 had shown how workers could take power. For instance, one of the characteristics of the ultra-left opposition inside the German Communist Party in 1919 was, according to the party leader of the time, Paul Levi, to see 'the revolution

as a purely economic process', rejecting 'political means of struggle as harmful' and seeing 'the general strike as the alpha and omega of revolution'.

But what was said by ultra-left, semi-anarchist elements from one side, could also be said by left and not so left Social Democrats as well. In 1920, when right wing militarists attempted a coup in Germany, the country's leading trade union bureaucrat, Legien, was prepared to call a general strike to save the necks of himself and his fellow Social Democrat leaders. But it was a purely 'peaceful' general strike which could not achieve its demand for a purging of the armed forces because only in some parts of Germany were revolutionaries able to take the initiative in turning the strike into armed action to disarm that army.

In the 1930s the slogan of the general strike against war was taken up by the Independent Labour Party. It had broken with the Labour Party, but refused to turn seriously to a revolutionary perspective. A revolutionary perspective would have meant seeing any war as raising the opportunity for an intensification of revolutionary action. The ILP leaders, however, were not prepared to abandon their essentially parliamentary perspective and raised the slogan of the general strike as a way of avoiding commitment to such action.

When the slogan fits

In 1984-85, during the Great Miners' Strike, the slogan of the general strike likewise came from two apparently opposed directions. On the one hand it was raised by people like Livingstone and Benn who had not broken with the idea that what matters is parliamentary action reinforced by extra-parliamentary activity. On the other it came from sects who refused to look the reality of the class struggle in Britain at that time in the face.

The Socialist Workers Party argued that the slogan did not fit because of the way the Labour Party leadership and the TUC general council had sabotaged the movement in solidarity with the miners. But we also went on to say something else: if the slogan did fit, as it did in 1992 against pit closures, then it is necessary to raise alongside it slogans about rank and file control and about confrontation with the state.

We were vehemently opposed to people like Kinnock and Willis, at the time the Labour Party leader and the TUC general secretary respectively, who opposed general strikes under all circumstances. But that did not mean we fell into the trap of seeing the slogan as a panacea which fits all situations.

That trap meant failing to emphasise the immediate concrete steps that could have been taken to build solidarity with the miners and to expose traitors like Kinnock and Willis. And it would mean, if the struggle rose to the level of real general strike action, failing to raise the further slogans that alone could lead to victory.

We have to follow Engels, Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky in avoiding that trap.

Insurrection

COLIN SPARKS

'Street barricades' are part of our mythology. A common judgement on a leftist not ready to join the Socialist Workers Party is that they will be 'on the right side of the barricades'. They are, in fact, the historical symbol of revolutionary socialism: the hard necessity for armed insurrection if the working class is to seize power from its exploiters. The first socialist to formulate this idea was the French revolutionary Auguste Blanqui in the 1830s. It was he who formulated the first rules of insurrection and prepared the first organised insurrectionary movement. For his efforts he was to spend more than 33 of his 76 years incarcerated in 30 different prisons.

The barricades for Blanqui were not mystical; they were the very practical response to the need to organise the military aspect of an insurrection. In May 1839, his 'Society of the Seasons' launched a failed insurrection in Paris. Blanqui planned the military aspect with precise detail. In the narrow streets of old Paris barricades provided an excellent means of defence against regular troops. They proved a reliable weapon later in 1848, when the masses rose to overthrow the tottering monarchy of Louis Philippe. The ruling class certainly feared them; the counter-revolution of Napoleon III rebuilt the centre of Paris with wide streets to make barricades less of an effective weapon.

But the barricades, of course, were a weapon of struggle appropriate to a certain level of military technique. The development of modern warfare has rendered them less of a central element in armed struggle. The real core of Blanqui's discovery was quite independent of a particular military form. What he recognised was that the seizure of power is a military question. In order for a new class to rule it is essential that it utterly smash the armed apparatus of the old order. The only way to achieve that end is to deploy superior military forces and this entails detailed military preparation: the arming and training of a revolutionary guard capable of fighting the enemy.

A large part of the task of breaking up an army is, of course, political—the subversion of the military hierarchy and the direct appeal to the ordinary soldiers to make common cause with their class brothers and sisters. There are, however, in any army special elite units which it is impossible to win over and which have to be defeated. And even the subversion of ordinary units requires force.

The secret of any army is that it is more dangerous to disobey than to obey. The reason why men 'go over the top' even in slaughters like the Somme in World War One is that there is some chance of surviving. To refuse orders in the face of the enemy means certain death at the hands of your own military police. The revolution has to convince the mass of soldiers that it is more dangerous to fight against it than to disobey their officers. That means shooting the officers who give the order to fire on the workers.

All of this Blanqui saw. He took it seriously, organising to achieve those ends. But his life was one of heroic failure, best summed up by a series of events towards the end of his life.

On 31 October 1870, a spontaneous demonstration of workers called on Blanqui to form a new government. He accepted but was powerless to act, and the insurrection collapsed. He went underground, but his organisation was in tatters. His newspaper collapsed from lack of funds. On 21 January 1871 members of his party tried again, but Blanqui refused to join them. They failed and Blanqui was forced to leave Paris, to be arrested on 17 March. On 18 March, the masses of Paris rose and established the Commune. Blanqui, a prisoner of the reactionaries, could play no part in that first great experiment in workers' power.

What Blanqui did not recognise was the decisive role of the masses in the revolution. He saw the military aspect of insurrection, but had no real grasp of its vital political dimension. In his *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky made the following judgement on Blanqui:

> Insurrection is an art, and like all art it has its laws. The rules of Blanqui were the demands of a military revolutionary realism. Blanqui's mistake lay not in his direct but his inverse theorem. From the fact that tactical weakness condemns a revolution to defeat, Blanqui inferred that an observance of the rules of insurrectionary tactics would itself guarantee the victory. An active minority of the proletariat, no matter how well organised, cannot seize power regardless of the general conditions of the country.

In this point history has condemned Blanquism. But only in this. His affirmative theorem retains all its force. In order to conquer power, the proletariat needs more than a spontaneous insurrection. It needs suitable organisation, it needs a plan, it needs a conspiracy. Such is the Leninist view of this question:

> An insurrection against the old order is such an enormously difficult task that it can only succeed in the right circumstances. In Lenin's classic definition the old order must be incapable of continuing to rule, the masses must demand a new order, and there must be a conscious revolutionary party capable of leading the masses. Such fortunate conjunctures occur but rarely in history. But they do occur.

It is the task of the revolutionary party to prepare for those moments. For success it is necessary to have the deepest implantation in the life of the masses. It is necessary that the masses have learnt from long experience to trust the party in struggle. It is necessary that the idea of socialism have permeated the minds of the masses. It is necessary that the masses themselves are prepared to fight for their own liberation. But it is still, even then, necessary for the insurrection to be organised as a technical operation.

It is for this last reason that we have to keep on defending those 'barricades'

and to learn the lessons from Blanqui. Against his reformist detractors, he grasped a great truth and a revolutionary truth. It is not the only lesson of revolutionary politics, but it is an important one. Those who attack 'Blanquism', 'putschism' and 'insurrectionism' are not pointing to a better road for socialism. They attack the weaknesses and vices of a great revolutionary in order to justify their own refusal to think through the problems of how the working class can come to power. Their road is a road to failure and defeat.

Revolution and violence

JOHN MOLYNEUX

It is certainly likely that a revolution would involve some violence for the simple reason that the ruling class is not going to surrender its wealth and power peacefully. For the same reason, to reject revolution because it involves violence is to reject the possibility of getting rid of capitalism. And however much violence there would be in a revolution, it pales into insignificance compared with the violence involved in allowing capitalism to continue.

Capitalism is inseparable from violence and generates it at every turn. Thus the daily process of capitalist production exposes workers to injury, disease and even death—all in the pursuit of profit. There is the violence of condemning thousands of millions to poverty, and hundreds of millions to starvation in a world overflowing with wealth. There is the violence of military dictatorship—the only form in which capitalism can survive in many parts of the world, and the violence of imperialism which supports and maintains it.

There is the violence of capitalist war which has claimed at least 100 million victims this century and which threatens the ultimate violence of the nuclear holocaust.

No system based on the exploitation of the overwhelming majority by a tiny minority can maintain itself without violence. No system based on the competitive struggle for profits, one firm against another, one country's firms against another's, can avoid war. The only way to end this ongoing violence is for the working class to use the collective violence of revolution to overthrow capitalism. But having said this, it's still important to challenge the capitalist image of revolution as an orgy of mindless bloodletting.

Revolution is violent. It is the forcible imposition of the will of one section of the population, the working majority, on the other, the ruling minority. But precisely because it is a question of the majority repressing the minority rather than the other way around, it is likely to involve relatively little bloodshed.

The bourgeoisie cannot fight its own battles; it is numerically weak. It depends on others, basically workers in uniform, to fight for it. All the violence the ruling class inflicts on the working class is done by one section of the workers against the rest. A powerful working class movement that is united, ready to fight, and correctly led, can prevent this. It can break the power of the ruling class by winning over the rank and file of the army. When this happens the ruling class is unable to mount the level of resistance which would necessitate the use of very extensive violence by workers. It was because just such a process had taken place in the Russian Revolution of 1917 that the October insurrection in St Petersburg cost only a handful of lives.

It is also important to remember that revolutions don't begin with acts of violence by revolutionaries. They arise from the class struggle itself and erupt

when the class antagonisms in capitalism boil over.

If, however, the working class fails to use the necessary force at the decisive moment, then it lays itself open to the immeasurably greater violence of capitalist repression. Thus, during the Paris Commune of 1871, 30,000 communards were slaughtered in a few days. The fascist counter-revolutions of Italy, Germany and Spain took the lives of millions. The Chilean coup of 1973 and the Polish coup of 1981 show the same basic feature. In all these cases the failure to press home the revolution is punished by a one-sided civil war of hideous violence and barbarity.

Anyone put off revolution because of its alleged 'violence' is simply being duped by the utterly hypocritical arguments of bourgeois politicians who preach 'non-violence' to the workers, but never practise it themselves.

Soviets: the lessons of 1905

TONY CLIFF

The Russian Revolution was the 'great dress rehearsal for 1917'. The revolutionary movement threw out new ideas and new forms of organisation. Tony Cliff looks at the different aspects of the movement and the lessons for today.

There were three waves of strikes in 1905: in January, October and November. The January strike was sparked off by a very small event. Four workers in the massive Putilov engineering factory in St Petersburg, which employed 12,000 workers, were sacked. What appeared as the tiniest conflict brought forward an avalanche.

The Putilov workers went on strike against the victimisation of the four on 3 January. The workers were members of an organisation called the Assembly of Russian Factory and Workshop Workers. This was a police trade union. In St Petersburg the union was led by Father Gapon, a prison chaplain, and a protege of the head of police, Colonel Zubatov.

After 3 January all branches of the Assembly held mass meetings throughout St Petersburg. Workers proceeded from the individual incident at the Putilov factory to general issues facing the Russian workers. Under the influence of the euphoria generated by these mass meetings, Gapon suggested adding to the original demand for the reinstatement of the four sacked workers and the removal of the foreman responsible, a list of other demands: an eight hour day, increase in the daily wage, improvement of sanitary facilities and the granting of free medical aid.

Gapon thought it would be a good idea to have the workers turn to the Tsar for support. The police department concurred with this. A few benevolent words from the throne, accompanied by some small measures to ameliorate workers' conditions, would be enough, they thought, to stop the movement from going to extremes, and would reinforce the role of the Tsar as the workers' friend. The idea of a petition and a solemn procession was born. The petition would humbly beg the Tsar for redress of the workers' grievances.

While the police were making plans, the St Petersburg Social Democrats (socialists) were active. After a slow start they intervened in the movement and achieved a measure of success. They sent speakers to the district meetings of the Assembly, and succeeded in introducing resolutions and amendments into the original text of the petition.

The result was a petition very different from the one originally envisaged by the leaders of the Assembly. A whole string of political demands were included: freedom of assembly for the workers, land for the peasants, freedom of speech and the press, the separation of church and state, an end to the Russo-Japanese War, and the convocation of the Constituent Assembly.

The Putilov strike which began on 3 January, became by the 7th a general

strike of the whole of St Petersburg involving some 150,000 workers. On Sunday 9 January, 200,000 St Petersburg workers marched in an enormous but peaceful procession to the Tsar's Winter Palace, headed by Father Gapon.

The crowd was carrying pictures of the Tsar, holy icons and church banners. A tiny group of Bolsheviks were marching at the end of the procession with a red banner. The Mensheviks were also present with a similar number of supporters. When the procession came to the Winter Palace, the Tsar refused to receive the petitions. The troops guarding the Winter Palace were ordered to fire into the crowd. More than a 1,000 people were killed and as many as 2,000 wounded.

Workers learned from bitter experience that icons and pictures of the Tsar are less potent than revolvers and guns. Writing a month after the event, Lenin stated that '9 January 1905 fully revealed the vast reserve of revolutionary energy possessed by the proletariat.' But then he added that it revealed 'as well...the utter inadequacy of Social Democratic organisation'.

St Petersburg was in the grip of a total strike. And the general strike spread from the capital to many cities hundreds or even thousands of miles away. The economic demands of workers led to political demands, economic struggle led to political struggle and vice versa. The two were not separated.

Finally, on 6 August, the Tsar made a concession. But instead of giving the long promised national assembly, nothing was given but a consultative body—the Duma—with no power to legislate. The Duma was at the mercy of the Tsar. Out of the 1,400,000 St Petersburg citizens only 13,000 had the vote. This roused the popular passion to fever heat, and led to the second great wave of strikes in October, in which the demands were overwhelmingly political.

At the same time the demand for the eight hour day was central. The strike started in Moscow and from there it spread to St Petersburg. The St Petersburg soviet was established. By 13 October the number of strikers throughout Russia exceeded one million. Practically all the railway lines were stopped. The post stopped, schools were closed, water and gas supplies ceased, the country, the cities and the communications between them were practically at a standstill. Poland was completely paralysed by the strike, as was Finland.

On 17 October the Tsar signed a proclamation giving a constitution to the Russian people. This manifesto pledged civil liberty with inviolability of the person, freedom of speech and association. It promised facilities for spreading electoral rights throughout the nation, leaving the details to the new Duma. Finally it agreed that no law would be enforceable without the approval of the state.

The workers were not satisfied. The Tsar's proclamation whetted the workers' appetite for more. The revolutionaries demanded the dismissal of General Trepov, head of the police and Cossacks in St Petersburg, the removal of the troops to 20 miles from the city, a general amnesty and the formation of a national citizen's militia. They also demanded a political amnesty.

They declared that while there was freedom of meeting, the meetings were still surrounded by troops. While there was freedom of the press, the censorship remained. While there was freedom of learning, the universities were occupied by troops. The inviolability of the person was given, but the gaols were filled with political prisoners. A constitution was given but the autocracy remained.

A third wave of strikes followed in November. The heart of these were economic demands. The unifying demand for the eight hour day now dominated the strike. There was a total strike in St Petersburg. On 3 November the whole town was practically shut down.

Outside St Petersburg there was a different picture. In the provinces the strike call was not answered, and in St Petersburg itself the employers reacted by mass lockouts affecting tens of thousands of workers. By the beginning of December the Tsar felt strong enough to take massive repressive measures. The whole executive committee of St Petersburg trade unions was arrested, the National Railroad Union was dissolved, new anti-strike regulations were promulgated.

On 7 December a strike broke out in Moscow in protest against these repressive measures. It spread to St Petersburg where about 125,000 people came out on strike. This was the springboard for an armed insurrection in Moscow. Alas, after a week of struggle the insurrection was bloodily crushed by the Tsarist army.

Mass strikes, soviets and state power

Mass strikes pose the question of state power. Which class is going to rule, the capitalists or the working class? This is why in Russia it brought forward a new institution, the soviet, or workers' council.

The soviet, to start with, is simply a strike committee, but unlike the normal strike committee which covers an individual workplace, the soviet covers numerous workplaces. In time the soviet challenges the government of the day. Therefore the soviet is the form of organisation of workers fighting for power, and, as Lenin pointed out very early in the life of the soviets, it is the form of organisation of workers in power.

The soviet was created first in St Petersburg in October 1905 and it spread subsequently to a number of other cities. Their establishment meant that two governments coexisted side by side: the official government of the Tsar, and the unofficial government of the workers. Such dual power could not go on for any length of time and, after a couple of months, it was the Tsarist government that managed to annihilate the soviets.

Mass strikes in themselves, even when organised by soviets, cannot get rid of the rule of the capitalists. They can win concessions from the capitalists, but they cannot make the capitalists give up their economic and political power. The capitalists would rather lose their profits than their property. The

strike can win bread, it cannot win the bakery. The capitalists can survive much longer in a strike than the workers because they have much more fat to live on.

In the final analysis the capitalists can be removed from power only by force. As Marx put it: 'Violence is the midwife of any new society.' The insurrection is necessary for the victory of the mass strike and the soviet. Hence the December insurrection in Moscow was a step forward in the march of the revolution.

The act of insurrection cannot be carried out by the soviets. The soviet organises all workers, both advanced and backward. That is the strength of the soviet—that it is all-inclusive. Ultimately, the act of insurrection demands much more decisiveness. The insurrection needs a resolute leadership to plan the action and to time it. As Lenin put it: 'Insurrection is an art, and an art cannot be assumed to be known by every worker.' So it was the Bolshevik Party which organised the December 1905 insurrection in Moscow, and later the October 1917 insurrection in St Petersburg.

The decisive struggle of the revolution took place in the towns. But these were followed by widespread uprisings of the rural population. From the spring of 1905 to the autumn of 1906 peasant struggle developed throughout the countryside. Peasants seized landowners' land, ransacked their estates, took their grain and cattle. Without a peasant uprising, in a country like Russia where the industrial proletariat was a very small minority, a victorious revolution was not possible.

In 1905 the peasant uprising, following the struggle of the proletariat in the cities, was not widespread enough or strong enough to overthrow Tsarism. The Tsar managed to use peasants in uniform to suppress the Moscow insurrection. The 1905 revolution showed clearly the relation between the proletariat and the peasantry. It also showed the relation between the proletariat and the liberal bourgeoisie.

When the revolution started in January the liberal bourgeoisie which was very weak in backward Russia was quite ecstatically for it. But the revolutionary ardour of the leaders cooled off as the revolution advanced, drawing millions of workers and peasants into political and social struggle. If at the beginning, in January, the bourgeoisie supported the strike enthusiastically, in November, when the struggling workers were demanding the eight hour day, and thus threatening the employers' pocket, the bourgeoisie reacted immediately, not only by lockouts, but also by opposition to all the revolutionary struggle. The bourgeoisie turned out to be much more afraid of the revolutionary workers than of counter-revolutionary Tsarism.

While Lenin in 1903 led the Bolsheviks to split from the Mensheviks inside Russian Social Democracy, the line of demarcation was not initially very clear. It was only in the heat of the 1905 revolution that both factions were formed into clear entities.

The Mensheviks saw the revolution as one to overthrow autocracy and establish bourgeois democracy. This revolution would be led by the bourgeoisie, and so they called on workers to collaborate with the bourgeoisie. This led one of their leaders, Plekhanov, to say of the December uprising: 'It was wrong to take up arms. We must value the support of the non-proletarian opposition parties and not repel them by tactless action.' Lenin's attitude was exactly the opposite—the insurrection was a step forward but not well enough organised.

Whereas the Bolsheviks saw in the peasantry a revolutionary force that in alliance and under the leadership of the proletariat could overthrow Tsarism, the Mensheviks saw them as basically a conservative force. And the Mensheviks, although quicker to support the soviet initially, never saw the soviet as a form of organisation for the struggle for workers' power and the form of organisation of workers' power, as the Bolsheviks came to do.

1905 shaped and sharpened the ideas of Bolshevism regarding the need for a proletariat independent from and in opposition to the bourgeoisie, which was bound to become more and more counter-revolutionary. The proletariat must lead the peasantry. The form of organisation of the workers and peasants in struggle for power and in power is the form of the soviet. The revolutionary party has to fight for leadership in the soviets and has to organise the insurrection itself. 1905 was also the year that made it possible for Trotsky to develop his theory of the permanent revolution.

1905 delivered a mortal blow to the shapelessness of the masses. In January 1905 most workers thought the Tsar could be spoken to as a decent person. Bloody Sunday, when the troops opened fire on unarmed protesters, opened the eyes of millions. In October the same workers believed that to shake a fist at the Tsar would be enough to force him to grant concessions. The general strike in October proved to them that this was not so. The use of arms was the next step.

1905 had all the ingredients which were to reappear in 1917 and lead to a successful revolution. Without the experience and lessons learnt in 1905 it is doubtful if the uprisings in 1917 would have led to the establishment of workers' power. But for the experience to be remembered and the lessons carried forward it needed a revolutionary party to act as 'the memory of the class', to educate new members and put the lessons of 1905 to the workers struggling in 1917.

The 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and democracy

MARK O'BRIEN

The 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is a concept which has summoned up visions of Stalinist despotism. This is a common misunderstanding of a concept central to Marx's understanding that socialist revolution involves essentially the self emancipation of the working class. The majority for the first time in history would have real power, 'dictatorship', over the minority of exploiters. This would be a much more democratic society than anything that has gone before and could not be further from the society Stalin established on the back of the defeat of the Russian Revolution of October 1917. In this essay, Mark O'Brien explores the relationship between democracy and socialism in the real Marxist tradition.

There is, of course, a historical relationship between socialism and liberal democracy. But socialism did not grow seamlessly from liberal political thought. It developed from the contradictions within both bourgeois democracy and early capitalist society.

According to the liberal philosophy which emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries the capitalist and the worker stood before each other as equals. Each had something to exchange: the worker his labour power, the capitalist wages. Each was seen as an isolated entity, standing outside of society and detached from history. The property of the capitalist was not questioned and the worker was regarded as free to sell or withdraw his labour. The whole range of novel political concepts—freedom, equality, rights, citizenship— which made up the fabric of liberal democratic ideology grew out of this picture of human relations.

It was an idealised picture. The supposedly equal act of exchange between capitalist and worker was not equal at all. The property of the capitalist had not appeared out of the blue. It had been gained through the unequal exchange of wages for labour—from exploitation. The capitalist had gained his wealth through violence—colonial domination, the forcing of the peasants off their land into the ghettos of early industrial England, the extension of the working day, the use of child labour and the payment of starvation wages.

The only way workers could begin to extract a 'fair' wage was by combining with other workers, and it was only collectively that workers could begin to conceive of abstract equality and freedom as a possibility, as a political demand. In combining together workers stepped out of isolation and into society, into political life. The dawning of socialist consciousness emerged from the contradictions of the capitalist liberal world view, and in antagonism with it.

The contradiction between the liberal facade used to sanctify capitalist relations and the horrific reality that belied it generated the 'Utopian Socialist' critique of capitalism. There were those in the movement around Robert Owen who had initially believed that the American constitution represented the most perfect form of political framework. If equal rights were defended for all then surely the abolition of all injustice must follow as prosperity diffused throughout society—an argument they had taken from Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*. By the 1830s, however, the misery of the American worker, especially that of the immigrant, had demolished the idea that political equality would dispense with material inequality.

Marx, too, began his political life on the extreme left of liberalism—a radical democrat. He campaigned for the extension of the democratic principle into every area of life, including the economic. His observations on the class character of the laws in his native Rhineland led him to question these liberal-democratic politics. The Diet [parliament], which had been the hope of the liberal opponents of the Prussian state, consistently enacted laws which favoured commercial interests against those of the peasantry. For example, it made the collection of dead wood from forested land a punishable offence. Similarly, as berries became a marketable commodity, the traditional right of the poor to collect berries in times of hardship was removed.

Marx had initially conceived of the liberal state as an embodiment of freedom, a continuation of the spirit of the Enlightenment, albeit distorted by class interests. In stripping away class interests, like the layers of an onion, Marx had hoped to find the essence of liberalism. But he found that, like the onion, once the layers had been peeled away, there was nothing at the centre. Liberalism was rooted in class and the liberal state was the embodiment of the power of commerce over the poor.

Democracy was a theme in the debates which raged in the socialist movement in the early 20th century. Many of the arguments then still apply today. Eduard Bernstein, foremost proponent of 'revisionism' in the German Social Democratic Party, the SPD, first argued that socialism could be seen as the end point of progressive bourgeois democracy. In Bernstein's view, the contradictions which had driven the Utopian Socialists and Marx to socialist conclusions were written out of the picture:

> The idea of democracy includes...a notion of justice and equality of rights for all members of the community, and in that principle the rule of the majority, to which in every concrete case the rule of the people extends, finds its limits. The more it is adopted and governs the general consciousness, the more will democracy be equal in meaning to the highest form of freedom for all. Democracy is in principle the suppression of class government, though it is not yet the suppression of classes.

The denial of a class content to liberal democracy lies at the heart of the reformist approach to it. If 'democracy' and the state float freely to some

extent above society, above class interests, then it must be possible for the working class or its representatives to use it for their own purposes. But, as Marx came to realise, liberalism—based on the notion of the isolated individual, the atomised worker—denies the class nature of its politics in order to conceal the reality of the class exploitation in which it is rooted. Only a state based on the abolition of class interests could openly declare its class nature. And only a state based on the power of the exploited class, against the class which had ruled them, could achieve the abolition of all classes.

Once the state, including the liberal state, is seen essentially as an instrument of class rule then the role of the workers' state under socialism becomes clear. Certain 'rights' would be abolished—the right to exploit labour for example—and, for some sections of society, the right to vote. In Russia after the revolution of 1917, the constitution confined the franchise to those who 'earn their living by production of socially useful labour', soldiers and disabled people. Specifically excluded were those who hired labour, rentiers, private traders, monks and priests, and officials and agents of the former police.

The dispersal of the Constituent Assembly in 1918 demonstrated the antagonism between bourgeois and socialist democracy. The convening of a Constituent Assembly which would establish universal suffrage and equal voting rights had long been a key demand of the opposition parties in Russia, including the Bolsheviks. Under conditions of Tsarist absolutism such demands as the setting up of bourgeois democratic institutions were clearly progressive. With the fall of the Tsarist regime in February 1917 a provisional government of parties on both the left and right of the liberal spectrum was established and the immediate convening of the Assembly was expected by millions of workers and peasants.

Disappointment followed, however, as the provisional government, weak and stumbling from one crisis to the next, continually postponed the Assembly with vague gestures to unspecified dates in the future. The parties of the provisional government, alarmed at the force of the movement that had been unleashed by the February Revolution, were attempting to use the call for the Constituent Assembly to block the revolution itself. Such acts as the appropriation of private property and the seizure of land were to cease until the convening of the Assembly which would decide the matter.

Only with the Bolshevik Revolution in October was it possible for the Constituent Assembly to be called. But now the tables turned. All those parties which had procrastinated on the calling of the Assembly were now its most ardent supporters. It became the rallying point of all those forces which opposed the Bolsheviks and the October Revolution.

The Constituent Assembly and the soviets stood before each other as antagonists, one representing the continuation of capitalism and accommodation with the Tsarist state, the other the overthrow of capitalism and the rule of

the working class and peasantry. The Social Revolutionaries had a numerical majority of delegates in the Assembly. The Bolsheviks were a majority in the soviets with their base in the cities and army. As the revolution gathered momentum in the rural areas the peasantry swung heavily over to the Bolsheviks.

The Social Revolutionary Party fragmented under the impact into a left and right—the left majority now supporting the Bolsheviks. The anti-Bolshevik majority in the Assembly was now purely formal—unrepresentative of the real movement in the countryside, whilst it remained a beacon of hope for every anti-revolutionary force within and outside Russia. A poll of the delegates at the Second Congress of Soviets showed that 505 soviets out of 667 stood for the transfer of all power to the soviets. Thus it was, what Trotsky called, 'the most democratic of all parliaments in the world's history' that dissolved the Constituent Assembly. Far from growing out of the institution of bourgeois democracy, socialist democracy had overthrown and replaced it.

Many were horrified. The German socialist, Kautsky, bemoaned the abolition of the Assembly in his *Dictatorship or Democracy*. Bourgeois democratic institutions were necessary, he argued, for the working class to mature sufficiently in its political consciousness and organisation. Underlying his argument was the idea that socialism would be achieved through gradual means.

Kautsky's fixation with bourgeois democracy stemmed from his belief that workers could not, through their own struggle, change their ideas and achieve a socialist consciousness. For Kautsky the educated middle class was a crucial element in the process, an element the Bolsheviks had dismissed:

> The importance of the educated classes the Bolsheviks did not recognise at first. For since at the beginning they merely served to increase the blind passion of the soldiers, the peasants and the town labourers, the masses of the educated were from the beginning hostile to the Bolsheviks.

But in taking power for themselves Russian workers had established a form of self government more profoundly democratic than any democracy which Kautsky argued was needed to 'educate' the working class. As Lenin put it, reacting furiously to Kautsky's arguments:

> Only Soviet Russia has given the proletariat and the whole vast labouring majority of Russia a freedom and democracy unprecedented, impossible and inconceivable in any bourgeois democratic republic, by for example taking the palaces and mansions away from the bourgeoisie (without which freedom of assembly is sheer hypocrisy), by taking away the printshops and stocks of paper from the capitalists (without which freedom of the press for the nation's labouring majority is a lie), and by replacing bourgeois parliamentarianism by the democratic organisations of the soviets which are a thousand times nearer the people than the most democratic bourgeois parliament.

The principles of workers' democracy were that elected delegates be subject to immediate recall and that delegates' salaries should be limited to the average industrial wage. Control in the soviet system was from below. The soviets were rooted in working class and peasant organisation. Delegates represented workplaces, regiments and villages. Unlike the Constituent Assembly, where universal suffrage masked property interests, the class character of soviet democracy was not concealed.

The Bolsheviks did not appear from nowhere in October of 1917 to seize leadership of a rudderless movement. Their influence was hard fought for and won on the factory floors in the revolutionary months of 1917. In conditions of working class revolution there was no other way of achieving leadership than through the organs of workers' democracy.

This 'direct democracy' had for the first time in history allowed the mass participation of workers and peasants in political life. Between 1917 and 1927, 8,700,000 peasants served in village soviets and 800,000 workers in urban soviets. Nine million had been elected to rural district, county and provincial congresses of soviets and 700,000 to the executive committees of these bodies.

It was precisely the principle of direct democracy which Bernstein and Kautsky chose to attack. Similar arguments have surfaced today. It is argued that, while such organisations may be suitable in the course of class struggle, they cannot possibly cope with the difficult decisions required in a technologically sophisticated and complex modern society. Inevitably, the argument goes, such 'direct democracy' would have to give way to a representative democracy run by technical and administrative specialists and professional politicians.

The second argument against the principle of direct democracy is that it must lead to a narrow sectionalism which is incompatible with the priorities of socialist planning. Where workers are directly in control of their workplaces they would inevitably come into conflict with the decisions of the state on questions such as how much is to be produced, whether a factory should close down or a section of industry continue production.

Such arguments frequently draw on the experience of bureaucratic planning in what was the Soviet Union. In doing this the very notion of workers' control is written out of the picture. Under state capitalism in Russia from 1928 and later in the so-called Communist bloc the pressures of military competition with the West determined the priorities of production. Thus the plan was in fact the result of the anarchy of world capitalist competition over which workers in Russia and the Eastern Bloc had no control whatsoever.

There are problems of workers' control potentially conflicting with wider social needs. However, it is a problem that was faced concretely by the Bolsheviks during the course of the revolution.

Seizing control of the factories by workers from February to October 1917 was a key element of the revolutionary process. Many owners and managers fled, leaving workers no option but to start running production themselves. As they did so, they developed in class consciousness and political confidence. After May-June 1917, the number of factory committees increased dramatically. The factory committee movement was crucial in the fragmentation of capitalist control of the economy. After the overthrow of capitalism however, with the task of socialist construction placed squarely on the agenda, the centrifugal forces in the movement would present an obstacle to further progress.

The response of the Bolsheviks to this problem was not to attempt to discourage the movement—quite the opposite. Lenin argued for the extension of the principle of workers' control to every type of organisation. Workers' control of production was reaffirmed as a goal of the revolution at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets after the Bolshevik Revolution. But how to begin to introduce national state planning which might override the wishes of localities?

The answer lay in the widest possible involvement of workers in the state organisations which would be responsible for determining national priorities. It would be through the extension of direct democracy, not its restriction, that the contradiction was to be resolved.

What attitude should socialists therefore take to the many struggles for liberal democracy that took place in Eastern Europe from 1989 on? Should they be dismissed as not bringing true workers' democracy? Not at all. It is of enormous importance to defend democracy against dictatorship.

There are times also when support for bourgeois democratic institutions, where there are none, becomes a rallying point for mass mobilisation. But support for bourgeois democracy is not simply a question of tactical expediency. When workers struggle for democracy, at stake is not just the formal institution of a parliament, but notions of equality, freedom, justice and rights.

As workers struggle for liberal democratic demands they run up against the state and the prevalent ideas of the movement are put to the test. Democratic abstractions can begin to take on a class character and move beyond the liberal framework. So revolutionary socialists support the struggle for bourgeois democratic rights where none exist.

The embracing of Western influenced bourgeois democratic demands by workers in Eastern Europe has been seen as reason for pessimism by many on the left. The rejection of the language of socialism and the tearing down of the statues of Lenin has seemed to many the end of Marxism—a project for the liberation of humanity that has failed.

But Marxism does not descend from above and its essence does not lie in its terminology. The heart of Marxism lies in the actions of human beings. In Russia, socialist democracy has been a dynamic force in the convulsive events of recent years. We can also look at the profoundly democratic nature of the workers' committees which have emerged for periods—for example in the

miners' strikes in Siberia and the Donbass. Such committees utilised the principle of immediate recall. They rotated chairpersons regularly and often had two chairs lest one individual should become dominant. In the large strikes of the summer of 1989 the mining towns of the Kuzbass were run by such workers' committees.

There will not be a simple transition to a dominant socialist consciousness by workers in the post- Stalinist regimes. Far from it. The process will be long and complex. Anarchist ideas, syndicalism, social democracy and national chauvinist ideas will find audiences. However, the intensity of the economic crisis, and the inability of these politics to deliver change means that their influence will be unstable and fluctuating.

The clash of class interests are so intense in the former state capitalist countries, and the contradictions within the ideas of the workers' movement so compressed, that the struggle for socialist democracy will be a convulsive one in the years to come. As democracy increasingly takes on a class character in the outlook of workers in the post-Stalinist countries, it will become a dynamic ideological factor in the rebirth of revolutionary socialism.

The role of the revolutionary party

LINDSEY GERMAN

Stalinism is dead. Many would also like to consign Leninism to the dustbin of history. Eric Hobsbawm puts it like this: 'The Leninist version of Marxism undoubtedly is in crisis, and indeed probably at an end for the time being [because] the era of the October Revolution is, I think, at an end.' (*Marxism Today*, January 1990).

The Leninist version of Marxism is usually taken to mean two things: revolutionary struggle and, perhaps most commonly, the building of a revolutionary party.

Lenin's Bolshevik Party is held to have led to Stalinism. All the excesses of the 1930s are laid at the door of those who built a revolutionary workers' party in Russia under the Tsar. Leninism is also associated by many on the left with centralisation, lack of democracy and a monolithic regime.

It is not hard to see why. One-party rule has dominated in the supposedly 'Communist' regimes. Party membership in these regimes has meant privilege and advance rather than collective struggle.

Yet there are those in the West—like members of the Socialist Workers Party—who continue to adhere to revolutionary Leninist organisation and who see it as the only answer to fighting the capitalist system. To understand why we need to look at what the Leninist party really stands for and why it is an essential part of working class struggle.

Parties broadly represent the interests of different classes, but they do not necessarily do so in a direct way. This is true in the case of the bulk of working class parties. The mass Labour and Socialist Parties which have grown up largely within this century, usually corresponding to the extension of the franchise to working class people, purport to represent the working class as a whole.

For many the party is the working class; the interests of the latter are identical with those of the former. Struggle and change can only take place within the party itself. This was the dominant view held by the bulk of the leaders of the pre-1914 German SPD, the largest reformist party. The party represented every aspect of workers' lives from publishing their daily newspapers to running their cycling clubs.

Similar views are held by many in the Labour Party today, who find activity and struggle outside the party incomprehensible and believe all workers' activity will be channelled through its 'historic representative party'.

In reality of course, Labour never has represented the whole of the working class movement—and it has certainly never encompassed all or even most working class struggles. These have usually begun outside the Labour Party and although often well supported by Labour Party members have only been passively supported by the party itself.

More fundamentally, any party committed to genuinely revolutionary change cannot simply represent the class. Working class consciousness under capitalism is uneven: to represent the whole of the working class is to represent the most backward as well as the most advanced. That is why, for example, Labour has always been a 'broad church' which includes racists and sexists, as well as those who fight against racism and sexism.

Labour can only remain a broad church by basing itself on passivity and electoralism, rather than on struggle. This may make it a mass organisation but it also makes it an increasingly ineffective one, unable to really fight to deliver what its members want.

Recognition of this has led many socialists over the years to break from Labour and attempt to build socialist organisation outside of its ranks. This is absolutely necessary if a genuine revolutionary organisation is to be built. But it is not easy.

Only through struggle will large numbers of workers break from Labour to be won to revolutionary organisation. In the absence of such struggle, the tasks of a revolutionary party are routine propaganda and a low level of agitation.

Lack of widespread support through struggle can lead to the attempt to take short cuts, usually as a means of overcoming the gap between what is needed to achieve socialism and the low level of working class struggle. But it also leads to a sort of elitism, which presupposes that the party knows best.

The party then becomes a substitute for the working class and genuine working class struggle. It acts on behalf of the class. In the eyes of its members, the party becomes the vanguard, with a correct programme which is just waiting for the working class to take it up. Often such organisations are equated with Leninist organisations, sometimes because they use the same terminology. Yet they have little in common with organisation as conceived by Lenin, or with the Bolshevik Party as it developed before 1917.

Lenin's conception of the party was that it was rooted in and was part of the working class. It was a vanguard party in the sense that it pulled together the best activists and the best experience inside the working class.

Such a party was necessary for one overriding reason. Consciousness inside the working class is uneven; only a minority become revolutionaries, at least until there is a fully revolutionary situation. Those revolutionaries have to fight for their ideas inside the working class. They have to do so through activity—challenging the existing system on a day to day level through strikes, protests etc—and through ideas.

A genuine revolutionary party therefore has to be an organisation of militants able to act together for the maximum effect in their workplaces and elsewhere; and it has to be the memory of the class—the place where history is discussed, practice theorised and lessons of struggle learned.

In order to do both things, the revolutionary party has to have a quite different structure from the reformist parties—it has to have a democratic centralist structure.

The term itself seems a contradiction. How can democracy operate through a centralised command structure? But the centralism is the logical outcome of genuinely democratic discussion. Issues are debated, argued about and sometimes fought over. Once they are settled, everyone—regardless of their position in the course of the debate—has to abide by the decision and act upon it. The mass reformist parties may have discussion and debate—but there is little to bind individual members to particular decisions. So discussion has no link with activity, and those with different positions go their own way. This lack of accountability—for example among Labour MPs who ignore conference decisions with impunity—is in fact highly undemocratic.

So democratic centralism comes from the needs of the class, not from any desire by individual leaders of revolutionary organisation to dominate, or from any innate ruthlessness.

Nor is the revolutionary party a fixed leadership which always knows best. The Leninist concept of leadership is completely alien to elitist views of leadership common under capitalism, or indeed to the substitutionist views of some on the left who believe that they constitute the vanguard.

It starts again from the uneven consciousness inside the working class, and from the fact that the dominant ideas in society are those of the ruling class. To combat those ideas, the most class conscious workers need to fight actively. They do so by forming themselves into a party, but also by fighting within the working class movement. Every party member has to try to become a leader inside the working class movement.

Therefore leadership means knowing how to combat the ruling class ideas which most workers accept most of the time; it also means knowing how to act to channel the power of the working class, whether through a small strike or through the insurrection.

Members of a revolutionary party should be far better equipped than most to lead in this way. This does not mean that they always do so, or that they are always right. Often, especially in times of rising class struggle, those revolutionaries who have argued for socialist politics year in and year out can be some of the slowest to recognise a mood of militancy inside the working class.

This was true even of the Bolshevik Party in 1917. Trotsky described how many of the most experienced Bolshevik leaders were slow and conservative:

> Each party, even the most revolutionary party, must inevitably produce its own organisational conservatism; for otherwise it would lack the necessary stability. This is wholly a question of degree. In a revolutionary party the vitally necessary dose of conservatism must be combined with a complete freedom from routine, with initiative in orientation and daring in action.

He goes on to say: 'Both conservatism and revolutionary initiative find their

most concentrated expression in the leading organs of the party.' (*The Lessons of October*)

But in general where there is struggle, revolutionaries are often in the forefront of leading it, of being part of it and of hopefully arguing against the reformists in order to bring it to a successful conclusion.

Leadership inside the class also means leadership inside the party, which fights for its political position and fights to implement the decisions that are made. But that leadership should be constantly tested in terms of whether its decisions are basically correct, whether it implements them properly and so on.

The Leninist theory of the party—like most Marxist theory—sprang from the experience of trying to build organisation. As John Molyneux has put it:

> The tendency of Stalinist theoreticians to write Russian revolutionary history as though there were only two protagonists, the Russian people and Lenin, has created an image of Bolshevism as invented by Lenin much as Watt invented the steam engine. In fact the break with gradualism in the sphere of organisation was itself a gradual and only semi-conscious process, though one marked by many sharp and conscious struggles. (*Marxism and the Party*)

The move towards democratic centralist organisation—towards turning the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party (RSDLP) into a 'Leninist' organisation—came in 1903. It came as a result of two things: the conditions of Tsarism, which entailed a level of secrecy and discipline in order for socialists to operate effectively; and the development of a layer of socialists inside the movement who were prepared to talk about socialism but less prepared to link that talk to activity.

So Lenin forced the split between what became known as Bolsheviks and Mensheviks inside the RSDLP on a seemingly trivial basis—but in reality on the basis of commitment to activity in the fight for socialism.

From this period right up to the revolution of 1917 and beyond, Lenin repeatedly fought for the party to be a body which led inside the working class, but also which avoided accommodation to the vagaries of working class struggle—towards liquidating itself into the struggle or standing aloof from it.

The test of the Bolsheviks came in 1917, when the party genuinely became a mass party of the working class and where its democratic centralist structure allowed it to lead the struggle through the many ups and downs until the final victory in October.

The contrast with Germany, where the working class movement was on the surface stronger, could not have been greater. The mass party of the working class there, the SPD, supported imperialist war in 1914 and betrayed the revolution in 1918-19. Those who shared Lenin's political principles, such as Rosa Luxemburg, found themselves isolated and without a mass revolutionary party to help lead the revolution.

After 1917 socialists throughout the world attempted to build parties on the Leninist model. In a revolutionary situation, such as existed in much of Europe following the end of the first world war, Leninist parties were seen as the most effective means of organising. The experience of Russia led many workers to believe that Leninist organisation was the means by which workers themselves could successfully challenge the power of the capitalist state and themselves take power.

The Bolshevik model fitted at a time when the old parties were discredited and revolution seemed imminent. But as the capitalist system restabilised, and as the mass reformist parties once more sought to head off the struggle, so the various hopes of revolution went down to defeat.

The isolation of Russia in turn meant that the gains of the revolution were lost. By the end of the 1920s Stalin had ensured that the USSR was set on a path of competition with the West—with everything that entailed. The rate of exploitation rose massively, collectivisation in agriculture was forced through and both were accompanied by a very high level of repression.

Much of this was done in the name of the party. But in reality some of the worst fates were reserved for those who had built Bolshevism before 1917. Stalin liquidated virtually all of the leading 'Old Bolsheviks'.

The party had become by this time the party of the bureaucracy which was responsible for workers' exploitation—not the party of the working class.

This development was not inevitable. The growth of ideas and freedoms in every area of life, which flourished after 1917, continued for a remarkably long time given the extremely unfavourable conditions of isolation, famine, civil war and general scarcity and cultural backwardness which existed in post-revolutionary Russia.

But they could not escape the counter-revolution necessary to make the economy 'catch up and overtake the West'.

Many would argue that the history of Russia has invalidated Lenin's project. On the contrary. The workers' revolution led by the Bolsheviks and the few short years which followed it were the only period in Russian history where workers' control of society allowed any genuine freedom.

And any theory of revolutionary change today has to include the question of organisation: the revolutionary party.

All the aspects of society which led Lenin to build the Bolsheviks are just as present today. The exploitative system under which we live is defended by a state machine which attempts to ensure continued capitalist rule. It can only be confronted by centralised organisation, based not on parliament, which has never been able to challenge the power of the state, but on workers' councils which can become the centre of an alternative source of power— that of workers' control of production.

This reason alone—the need to confront and smash the capitalist state—would be enough to justify the building of a revolutionary party. Those who

argue against the building of such a party are also those who believe that the state is a neutral body which can be put at the disposal of workers. All the experience of history shows the dangers of this approach, of how peaceful reform can become violent counter-revolution as, for example, in Chile.

But the party also has a role in periods like the present, when the level of struggle is far from that in periods like 1917. It firstly maintains the connection between revolutionary socialists and the working class movement. Secondly it allows socialists grouped together—in unions, in campaigns, in workplaces—to argue for a particular position or tactic. It therefore enables socialists to operate more effectively.

It also tries to overcome the division between politics and economics within capitalist society. The idea that political struggle is separate from the economic struggle of workers through strikes and so on is not only erroneous—there is no basic separation of the political and economic for the capitalist class—it also helps to divide and weaken working class struggle. The revolutionary party is constantly trying to overcome the divisions between the two.

And it becomes a source for revolutionary ideas inside the working class. The party as the memory of the class tries to generalise the experience of past revolutions, of international struggles, or lessons of trade union struggles. It does so through its publications and meetings, but especially through the revolutionary paper, which links up the different militants and the different struggles.

Even in periods like the present, the success or failure of disputes and campaigns can depend on the intervention of revolutionaries. The relevance of revolutionary ideas to the working class can be shown by the way in which those ideas gain support among a wider audience in struggles like, for example, those of health workers, teachers and postal workers in the last few years.

Despite what those such as Hobsbawm say, the class struggle continues to be the key to achieving socialist transformation. That class struggle arises whether or not there is a revolutionary party. But the organised intervention of conscious revolutionaries can make a great deal of difference to the outcome.

A party rooted inside the working class is the key to that intervention and the key to eventual success. Far from Lenin's theory of the party being out of date, it will be indispensable if the working class is to succeed in making a socialist revolution.

Ten questions for socialists

1. Why have there been many more general strikes this century than last?
2. Are general strikes still possible and can they win?
3. When is it right to raise slogans calling for a general strike?
4. How do soviets or workers' councils differ from factory or strike committees?
5. Why do soviets pose a challenge to the existing state?
6. How can a revolution succeed faced with the power of the army and the police?
7. Would revolutionaries ever defend parliamentary democracy?
8. How does workers' democracy differ from parliamentary democracy?
9. If revolution is about the self emancipation of the working class, why will we need a revolutionary party?
10. Won't a Leninist party lead to the dictatorship of the party, not the proletariat?

Further reading

The classic account of how the October Revolution succeeded is Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* (£23.50)—essential and gripping reading. *Arthur Ransome in Revolutionary Russia* (£12.95) gives an eye-witness account of the revolution by a British journalist (and later author of *Swallows and Amazons*) won to respect and admiration for the Bolsheviks in the terrible circumstances of the Russian Civil War.

For a short introduction to the key issues raised for revolutionaries by the October Revolution there is Trotsky's *The Lessons of October* (£1.95). Tony Cliff's biography of *Lenin*, and particularly the first two volumes, *Building the Party* (£9.95) and *All Power to the Soviets* (£7.95), provides more vital analysis of this key moment in world history.

International Socialism 52 (£3.00) has a lead article by John Rees 'In defence of October' and this is followed up in *International Socialism* 55 (£3.00) where Rees defends the October Revolution in a debate with those on the left who would throw out this heritage.

Rosa Luxemburg's *The Mass Strike* (£1.95) draws key conclusions from the experience of the 1905 Revolution in Russia and *Reform or Revolution* (£2.50) examines the question of whether there is a reformist alternative to the barbarism of capitalism, and the role of reformist leadership in relation to the working class.

A pamphlet by Duncan Hallas and Chris Harman, *Days of Hope* (£0.95), analyses the General Strike of 1926 in Britain, which shook the British ruling class but saw the miners betrayed by the TUC general council and eventually starved back to work.

Lenin's *State and Revolution* (£2.50) provides a brilliant analysis, written in the midst of the Russian Revolution, of why we need a revolution to start building socialism, on the basis of working class power exercised through workers' councils. Marx's *The Civil War in France* (£1.95) gives a passionate account of the rise and fall of the Paris Commune, the first historical experience of workers' power, and the lessons to be drawn from it.

The role of the revolutionary party is examined in Trotsky's and Cliff's writings mentioned above. *Party and Class* (£3.50) deals with key aspects of the role and organisation of a revolutionary party with essays by Tony Cliff, Duncan Hallas, Chris Harman and Leon Trotsky and an introduction by Alex Callinicos.

All these books are in print and available from Bookmarks, the socialist bookshop, 265 Seven Sisters Road, London N4 2DE or through your local Socialist Workers Party branch.

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