

Mike Macnair

Revolutionary strategy

Marxism and the challenge of left unity

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Contents

Introduction	5
1. Marxism as a political strategy	25
2. Reform coalition or mass strike?	38
3. The revolutionary strategy of the centre	52
4. War and revolutionary strategy	66
5. Communist strategy and the party form	85
6. Unity in diversity	100
7. The ‘workers’ government slogan	115
8. Political consciousness and international unity	131
9. Republican democracy and revolutionary patience	157
Notes	173
Index	185

In memory of Cameron Richards -
a thinking communist
(May 12 1968 - July 2 2008)

Introduction

Should socialists join, or support, government coalitions including people like Brown in order to keep out the open rightists?

Should we be fighting for unity of the Marxist left on the basis of open defence of Marxist politics, or for a “new mass workers’ party”, or a “party not programmatically delimited between reform and revolution”? Or is it wrong to seek to create a party at all?

If we should be fighting for a Marxist party, does that mean it should be Trotskyist? Or Maoist, or Stalinist? Or something else?

Should we call for a workers’ government, and if so what would we mean by it?

Should we be ‘defeatists’ in relation to our own country’s wars? If so, what does this mean?

These are present political questions affecting socialists. But they are unavoidably expressed in terms of identification with political trends which emerged out of historical splits in the workers’ movement: Marxism, anarchism, social-democracy, Leninism, ‘left’ or ‘council’ communism, ‘official communism’, Trotskyism, Maoism ... This is unavoidable. Humans have no guide to action in the future other than theorising on what has happened in the past, and we do it all the time we are awake.

Capitalism in the first decade of the 21st century is not in particularly good shape. The triumphalism which greeted the fall of the Soviet Union and its satellites, and the deepening market turn in China, is largely gone. There is increasingly widespread awareness that the free market nostrums of the Chicago economists and the ‘Washington consensus’ produce deepening inequality both on a world scale and within individual countries. After the experience of the 1998

'east Asian' and 2001 'dot-com' market crashes, many pro-capitalist economists are nervy about the US budget and trade deficits, the level of consumer debt and associated risks to global liquidity. Even the US army has finally realised that the extreme free market "shock therapy" imposed on Iraq after the 2003 invasion has contributed to the insurgency they seem unable to defeat.¹

The political left, however, is in worse shape. This sort of statement is often made simply as a way of saying that the author's own group's views are not generally accepted. I do not mean to say this - though it is, of course, true that views of the sort held by CPGB comrades are held only by a small minority. The point is that though free market fundamentalism is in decline, the political left in general has not benefited from this decline.

The Labour/socialist parties are now as committed to free market dogmas as the parties of the right - in some cases more so. A large part of the former 'official communists' now fall into this camp: whether as *being* the major 'left' party, as in Italy, or as providing the hard-core of the pro-market wing of the 'left', like the ex-Eurocommunist and fellow-traveller Blairites in Britain. But this commitment has hardly benefited these parties. Though in Britain Labour has clung to office with capitalist support, and in Germany, France, Spain and Italy 'social-liberal' parties have moved in and out of office, the underlying trend has been one of declining numerical support for the parties of the consensus, including those which self-identify as 'of the left'; increased abstentions; episodic surges in voting support for anything perceived as 'an alternative', usually on the right but occasionally on the left; and a widespread belief that 'they' (politicians) are all corrupt.

Hence on a global scale, major growing elements in politics are religious and nationalist trends. The most obvious expressions are in the US - where the leverage of religious politics has not been diminished by the narrow victory of the Democrats in the 2006 Congressional elections - and the 'muslim countries' in the belt stretching from Morocco in the west to Central Asia and Pakistan in the east, and in south-east Asia.

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty characterises the islamist

political movements as “islamo-fascist”. This is misleading. The US christian right is far more like the Italian Fascisti and German Nazis. Like them, it appeals to the traditions of the formation of the nation state in which it lives (German Romantic nationalism, Italian unification and ‘Italia irridenta’, American radical Protestantism). Like them, it is informed by a *Dolchstosstheorie* (stab-in-the-back theory) in which military failure (in the US case in Vietnam) was caused by the disloyalty of the left and the ‘liberals’. And like them, it is affected by millenarian irrationalism (the renewed Roman empire in Italy, the thousand-year Reich in Germany, the ‘end times’ in the US religious right). The islamists are closer to the catholic-led anti-semitic movements of late nineteenth century Europe.² But the AWL’s characterisation captures the fact that, though some of the islamists are currently fighting US imperialism (and its British side-kick), their *domestic* politics are unequivocally reactionary.

Weaker versions of the same or similar phenomena can be found widely. For example, the hindu-nationalist right is in the ascendant in India; the Koizumi and Abe governments in Japan have promoted ‘revisionist’-revanchist nationalism and remilitarisation; eastern Europe and the Russian Federation have seen strong growth of far-right trends; western Europe has seen repeated, so far short-lived, electoral ‘protest votes’ for far-right parties.

Left electoral alternatives to market orthodoxy are, on the whole, far weaker. The problem is that when they have got to any size, they have been sucked into the role of junior partners to the ‘social-liberals’ in administering the capitalist regime, and thereby undermined their claim to offer an alternative to the neoliberal consensus. The Brazilian Workers’ Party, in origin a left alternative party, has *become* a social-liberal party of (coalition) government. The Italian Rifondazione Comunista in 2006 entered the social-liberal Prodi coalition government. And so on.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s there perhaps seemed to be a ‘non-electoral’ alternative: that of the ‘anti-globalisation movement’. On a small scale riots in London, Seattle and Genoa, on a larger scale the Mexican Zapatistas and Argentinian *piqueteros*, were seen by anarchists and ‘council communists’ - and by some Trotskyists - as

a sign that at last their time was beginning to come. The ‘social forum’ movement was built at least partly in an anarchist image. However, with the inception of the ‘war on terror’ in 2001 and still more with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the destructive power of the capitalist *states* has thrust itself rudely on the movement. The result has unavoidably been a renewed emphasis on high politics: even in Latin America, where ‘networks of resistance’, the Zapatistas, and Holloway’s ‘change the world without taking power’ had most influence, the left has shifted onto the electoral terrain.

The results have produced a continued social-liberal government in Brazil, and similar governments in Uruguay (Frente Amplio) and Chile - and governments which at least in rhetoric are to their left, Chávez in Venezuela, the victories of Morales in Bolivia and Correa in Ecuador. These are all undoubtedly political defeats for neo-liberalism. However, even the Venezuelan case is not sufficiently urgent for Washington to divert major attention and resources. To the extent that they are not focussed on the Middle East, Washington’s eyes are on Havana.³

Chávismo has provoked enthusiastic support from a distance among a significant part of the left, and has had some influence on electoral politics elsewhere in Latin America (in the sense of increasing the political availability of left rhetoric). But it has not yet begun to reshape the left internationally, as Bolshevism did after 1917, or as Maoism and, to a lesser extent, Castroism/Guevarism did in the 1960s.

In part, this is a matter of ‘wait and see’. The left internationally has seen a large number of sometimes *very* radical/left-talking nationalist and third-worldist charismatic individual leaders come and go in the last half-century. Some have themselves turned ‘realist’, like Nkrumah, Museveni, Jerry Rawlings or the leaders of the South African ANC; some have been ousted and/or killed by ‘realists’ in their own nationalist movements, like Sukarno, Ben Bella or Thomas Sankara. ‘Official communists’, Maoists, and Trotskyists in the process of moving towards ‘official communist’ politics, have celebrated one and all as the next Castro; for none has the celebration been long-lived. Given this background, it is understandable that in

spite of the enthusiasm of a part of the left, the broader movement should effectively suspend judgment on *Chávismo*.

In part, and more fundamentally, the problem is that *Chávismo* offers no real strategic lesson for the left beyond ‘find yourselves a charismatic leader’ (perhaps it should be: ‘try to win junior army officers to left politics’?). Bolshevism offered a worked-out strategic line for the road beyond capitalism, whether this line was right or wrong. The same was true of Maoism. The extensive international influence of Castroism/Guevarism consisted in part in the fact that Che Guevara falsified the course of the Cuban revolution into an example of the Maoists’ ‘prolonged people’s war’ strategy. In part it was due to the fact that Castro and his co-thinkers promoted third-worldism, a dilute form of the Maoists’ global policy of ‘surrounding the cities’. In both aspects, the Cubans’ self-presentation as something *different from* the ‘official communist’ bureaucratic regimes and parties offered to romantic young leftists the hope of an alternative strategy. *Chávismo*, as yet, offers no equivalent.

The organised far left across the world - the Trotskyist, Maoist, etc, groups - had hopes that the ‘anti-globalisation movement’ signalled a new rise in class combativity like the later 1960s; or, at least, the re-emergence of a ‘new left’ milieu out of which they could hope to recruit and build. More than 10 years on from the Mandeliste Fourth International’s turn to the milieu that became the ‘anti-globalisation movement’, and seven years since the ‘Battle of Seattle’, this belief has proved illusory. The organised far left has gained some ground in the trade union movement internationally. But it has done so partly through generational replacement and partly because the decline of the activist base of the socialist and communist parties has been steeper than the corresponding decline of most of the groups of the far left. At best these groups have stagnated. The apparent novelty that allowed the far left to appear as an alternative to large numbers of radicalising youth in the 1960s and 1970s is gone, and they have a large hostile periphery of ex-members who remain active in the broader movement. And the far left is widely - and often accurately - perceived as undemocratic in its internal functioning, as tending to export this undemocratic practice into the broader

movement, and as unable to unite its own forces for effective action.

To sum this up. Capitalism unfettered has not produced the blessings the neo-liberals claimed it would. Instead, it is producing deepening social inequality both within and between nations, and economic instability and episodic, so far localised, crises - as Marx claimed it would. And it shows every sign of producing an increasing tendency towards utterly destructive wars - as the 'classical Marxists' claimed it would. But the political left has not been the gainer. The main political gainer, instead, has been the 'anti-capitalist' *right*.

The shadow of bureaucratic 'socialism'

The short explanation of this situation is that the political left is still in the shadow of the bureaucratic 'socialist' regimes of the 20th century and their fall - or, in the case of China and Vietnam, their evolution towards openly capitalist regimes. It is not merely that these regimes were murderously tyrannical. The point is that all the sacrifices, both of political liberty and of material well-being, which the regimes demanded of those they ruled, *have only led back to capitalism*. As long as the left *appears* to be proposing to repeat this disastrous experience, we can expect mass hostility to liberal capitalism to be expressed mainly in the form of rightism, that is, of nostalgia for the *pre-capitalist* social order.

Now the Trotskyists - and still more the 'third camp' Trotskyists - may argue that this does not affect them or, to the extent that it does, complain that this is unfair to them. After all, they opposed the bureaucratic regimes and called for their revolutionary overthrow. Some small minorities within this general trend - the *Critique* group, the Spartacists, the neo-Marcyites - even foresaw that the continued dictatorship of the bureaucracy would lead to a collapse, and/or back to capitalism.

The problem goes back to the point I made earlier. Humans have no guide to action in the future other than theorising on what has happened in the past. Experiment in the physical sciences is no more than a way of *formalising* reliance on past actions as a guide to future actions. In politics, there can be no laboratory. Our only experimental evidence is the evidence of our history. Trotskyism as *theory* - and

here including *Critique*, the Spartacists and the neo-Marcyites - predicted that the working class in the countries run by bureaucratic 'socialist' regimes would resist the restoration of capitalism. Trotsky - and, following him, the Spartacists and neo-Marcyites - predicted that this resistance would find a political reflection in political splits within the bureaucracy. The majority of the 'orthodox' Trotskyists used this prediction to conclude that there *could not be* a restoration of capitalism. All of these predictions were categorically false. There has been no accounting for their falsity.

The point runs deeper. Under capitalism, there is an *objective dynamic* for the working class to create permanent organisations to defend its immediate interests - trade unions and so on. This dynamic is present even under highly repressive political regimes: as can be seen in apartheid South Africa, South Korea before its 'democratisation', and so on. These organisations tend, equally, to become a significant factor in political life. It is these tendencies which support the ability of the political left to be more than small utopian circles.

Under the Soviet-style bureaucratic regimes *there was no objective tendency towards independent self-organisation of the working class*. Rather, there were episodic explosions; but to the extent that the bureaucracy did not succeed in putting a political cap on these, they tended towards a *pro-capitalist* development. The strategic line of a worker revolution against the bureaucracy - whether it was called 'political revolution' as it was by the orthodox Trotskyists, or 'social revolution' by state-capitalism and bureaucratic-collectivism theorists - lacked a material basis.

This objection applies with equal force to those misguided souls who (like Tony Clark of the Communist Party Alliance) argue that the Soviet-style bureaucratic regimes were in transition towards socialism; that this inevitably "has both positive and negative features to begin with", but that the transition was turned into its opposite by the seizure of power by the bourgeoisie "gain[ing] control of communist parties and socialist states under the banner of anti-Stalinism".⁴

If we momentarily accept this analysis for the sake of argument,

the question it poses is: why have the true revolutionaries, the Stalinists, been so utterly incapable of organising an effective resistance to this take-over, given that ‘socialism’ in their sense covered a large part of the globe and organised a large part of its population? This is exactly the same problem as the Trotskyists’ ‘political revolution’ strategy, only with a different substantive line. The weakness of *Stalinist* opposition to the pro-capitalist evolution of the leaderships in Moscow, Beijing, and so on, reveals the same problem as that facing the advocates of ‘political revolution’. There were neither institutional means in the regimes through which the ‘non-revisionists’ could resist revisionism, nor any objective tendency in the regimes towards ongoing mass working class self-organisation on which opponents of revisionism could base themselves.

Trotskyists of all varieties continue to put forward as positive socialist strategy a revolution in the image of 1917 in Russia. But, as everyone knows, what happened to the Russian Revolution was the emergence of the bureaucratic regime, which has now ended - or is in the process of ending - in capitalism. Trotskyists are therefore required to account for *how* the bureaucratic regime arose, and to offer *reasons for supposing that the process would not be duplicated anywhere else which had a ‘1917-style’ revolution.*

Trotsky’s explanation was - to give a bare outline of it - that the working class took political power in Russia and continued to hold political power - albeit “with bureaucratic distortions”, as Lenin put it in 1921⁵ - into the 1920s. But the isolation of the Russian Revolution produced conditions of generalised scarcity in the country. These conditions required a state standing above the society to police distribution: and the state bureaucracy then became a new privileged stratum, which by the late 1920s took political power away from the working class. Variant accounts identify the new stratum as a new *class*, or in some cases as a new *state-capitalist* class. But the narratives of the rise of the bureaucracy and the causes of this rise remain the same.

There is a central strategic problem with this account. In 1917 the Bolsheviks led the soviets to take political power - a gamble on the Russian Revolution triggering a generalised socialist revolution

in central and western Europe. The gamble failed. In all probability, it had already failed by January 1918. At that point it was clear that Red Guards and fraternisation attempts were unable to stop the renewed German advance, let alone trigger the German revolution. As a result the March 1918 treaty of Brest-Litovsk destroyed both majority support for the Bolshevik government in Russia, and any serious prospect of a German revolution before the military victory of the Entente powers on the western front.⁶ Certainly it had failed by 1921. Revolutionary movements in Germany, Hungary and Italy, had been defeated. Further, the image of the Soviet regime had already begun to be a problem for leftists in the countries with powerful working classes, as a result of the suppression of the Kronstadt revolt and the adoption of the ban on factions in the Communist Party. This problem was reflected in the three-way split in the Comintern in 1921 between ‘centrists’, Cominternists and ‘left’/‘council’ communists.

After this failure, the longer the Bolsheviks attempted to *hold political power*, the more bureaucratic the regime became, and the more clearly it became an obstacle to the working class taking power elsewhere - as the Trotskyist theory itself explains.

Given the failure of the gamble, the Trotskyist account does not explain why any attempt to repeat a revolution in the image of 1917 would not end in the same way. It is ridiculous to imagine that the global imperialist-led system of states would not bend every effort to isolate a ‘new 1917’. Countries which are more ‘developed’ than the Tsarist empire in 1917 (now most countries) are *more* deeply integrated in the global division of labour, and isolation would therefore produce *more* scarcity and hence *more* need for a state-bureaucratic ‘policeman’.

Some Trotskyists would respond that Trotsky could and should have made a military coup in the period shortly after the death of Lenin.⁷ But even assuming that the result of such a coup would not have been to collapse the Soviet state (the most probable outcome), the problem is: what would Trotsky and his associates have done with political power? After the ‘left turn’ of the Stalin leadership in 1928-29, the overwhelming majority of the former left oppositionists went over to supporting this leadership.⁸ This shift expressed the fact that

the *practical* alternative to the policy of mixed economy, ‘alliance with the peasantry’ and ‘peaceful coexistence’ followed in 1921-27, so far as it could be carried into practice, was: for the Soviet state to step up the exploitation of the peasantry at home, while the Comintern pursued a more aggressive policy abroad in the hope of triggering a revolution which would break the isolation of the Soviet regime. This was the line actually adopted by Stalin and his co-thinkers in the ‘left turn’ of the ‘Third Period’. A Trotskyist-led USSR and Comintern would thus - in the absence of revolution in western Europe - have been driven towards the policy actually followed by the Stalinist-led USSR and Comintern, and would have lacked the *material wherewithal* to prevent the political rise of the bureaucratic caste.

To put the matter bluntly. Once the gamble on the European revolution had failed by 1921, the outcome which actually materialised - the bureaucratic dictatorship, itself irreversibly on the road back to capitalism, and standing as a road-block against the working class taking power in the central capitalist countries - was by a long way the most probable outcome of the Bolsheviks’ decision to attempt to hold on to political power.

Once we recognise that this is true, we can no longer treat the strategy of Bolshevism, *as it was laid out in the documents of the early Comintern*, as presumptively true; nor can we treat the several arguments made against the Bolsheviks’ course of action by Kautsky, Martov, and Luxemburg (among others) as presumptively false.⁹ I stress *presumptively*. In relation to each and every element of Bolshevik strategy there may be independent reasons to accept it; in relation to each and every argument of Kautsky, etc, there may be independent reasons to reject it. But the ‘victory of the Russian revolution’ on its own, or the course of the revolution after late 1917-early 1918, can no longer be taken as evidence for Bolshevik strategy as a package. What it led to was not a strategic gain for the world working class, but a 60-year impasse of the global workers’ movement and the severe weakness of this movement at the present date.

Probably most people who come into contact with the organised left don’t think about the issue at this level of analysis: ie, that the left has failed to account properly for Stalinism. What they see is

something much simpler: that the left groups are massively divided; and if they are familiar with the groups or pass through membership of them, that the groups are not really democratic but either *no more democratic than the capitalist parliamentary constitutional regime* - as is true of the Mandeliste Fourth International and its larger sections - or that they are characterised by bureaucratic tyranny just like Stalinism (as is true of the British Socialist Workers Party and numerous other far-left groups). In reality, the division is to a considerable extent the product of bureaucratic centralism, and both are at least in part *produced* by the failure to account properly for Stalinism.

Half-rethinking

The global political dynamics discussed above have led in the far left in most countries to a *half*-recognition that its disunity is undesirable; and a connected *half*-recognition that it is necessary to rethink the strategic assumptions of the last 80 years of its history.

‘Half-rethinking’ is a loose phrase intended to cover a wide range of related features. A few examples only. In the first place, although there are substantial groups which *are* rethinking or have rethought their strategy to some extent in various ways, there is a significant minority which simply blames the fall of the USSR and all the rest on the moral incapacity of individual leaders (whether these are to be ‘revisionists’ or ‘Stalinists’) and the absence of resistance similarly on the moral incapacity of individual leaders of the far left (‘revisionists’ or ‘Pabloites’) and maintains that it is sufficient for the left to go on in the old way (or one of the 57 varieties of old way). The existence of this trend means that only part of the left is rethinking.

Second, there is a very common phenomenon of accepting that some degree of unity is necessary for now, but at some point in the future ‘the revolutionary party’ in the Comintern sense will become necessary and possible. Hence we should now be for a provisional practical form of left unity - perhaps, as the Mandeliste Fourth International has suggested, a ‘party not programmatically delimited between reform and revolution’ - but one which has a ‘revolutionary Marxist faction’ within it. The Mandelites have argued for *parties*

of this type, the Socialist Workers Party for ‘united fronts of a special type’ which are not parties, enabling the SWP to remain a *party* within the broad unity. Several Trotskyist groups have argued for ‘non-liberal’ Labour or workers’ parties with an affiliate structure (which imagines the British Labour Party in its early history as further left than it actually was). This is a half-rethinking, in the sense that it poses changed current tasks, while leaving largely untouched existing strategic ideas.

Third, a wide range of authors address *one* or *some* strategic issues by way of rethinking, and propose unity on a new basis. Commonly this approach involves claims that the world has changed so profoundly that most of the history of the workers’ movement is no longer relevant. For example, István Meszáros argued in *Beyond capital* (1996) that 1917 failed because the logic of capital had not reached its global limits; today it has reached its global limits, and these limits pose a different form of strategy. Meszaros’ arguments have recently been cited by Hugo Chavez, and have been adapted in very different ways by Michael Lebowitz and by Cliff Slaughter.¹⁰ I call this sort of writing a half-rethinking because it asserts that some fundamental error has vitiated the whole history of our movement, and this is therefore to be discarded altogether in order to begin again on the basis of a theoretical construction applied directly to immediate conditions, rather than systematically addressing the full range of the history.

Not uncommonly the ‘new basis’ turns out, in fact, to be an old idea repackaged or reinvented. Thus, for example, John Holloway’s *Change the world without taking power* (2002) and Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2005) are all in different ways repackagings of the ideas of the 1970s ‘spontaneists’ and ‘autonomists’; and these were, in turn, repackagings of the ideas of the ‘left’ or ‘council’ Communists of the 1920s - which were themselves, at least in part, a repackaging of the ideas of the post-Bakunin Bakuninists. “Those who will not learn from history are condemned to repeat it” (Santayana).

This book began life in response to a particular instance of this sort of ‘half-rethinking’: a debate on questions of revolutionary strategy

in the French Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR, or ‘Ligue’), with an intervention by Alex Callinicos of the SWP.¹¹ The French strategy debate was intimately connected to the immediate question which was debated at the LCR’s 2006 congress: Should the LCR participate, without preconditions, in discussions whose aim was to try to achieve a single candidate of ‘the left’ in the presidential elections in 2007? (In the event, unity was not achieved, and there were five far left candidates.)

But this, of course, is a part of larger debates. In the first place an agreed candidate for the presidency in France would quite clearly have meant a coalition to create a *government*. This is usually true of electoral agreements for elections to parliaments or legislative assemblies, but it need not be. A non-aggression agreement in *parliamentary or legislative* elections might not involve commitment to join in creating a *government*. This has been done in the past. However, a French president is not a figurehead, but has direct governmental responsibilities.

The French debate was thus part of one being conducted more widely. Should socialists participate in coalition governments controlled by ‘social-liberals’ - ie, people with politics not dissimilar to the Blairites - in order to keep out the open parties of the right? Rifondazione Comunista in Italy joined Prodi’s Unione coalition government, with disastrous results. The German Die Linke is in a social-liberal regional government in Berlin. The Brazilian Workers’ Party succeeded in electing Lula as president and as a result has been participating as a minority in a ‘centre-left’ coalition.

The question was even posed, not as fancifully as it might now seem, to the Scottish Socialist Party before its recent crisis. Suppose that “pro-independence parties”: ie, the Scottish National Party, the Greens and the SSP, had won a majority in the May 2007 Scottish parliament elections. Should the SSP have joined a coalition executive with the SNP in order to create Scottish independence?

Secondly, the LCR is a section of the Mandeliste Fourth International - in fact, its strongest section. And since the early 1990s, the Fourth International has been promoting the idea of creating unitary left parties that, in Callinicos’s phrase, “leave open the question of

reform and revolution”. The original example was the Brazilian Workers’ Party; then the Italian Rifondazione Comunista; the closest to home in Britain is the SSP.

In a series of exchanges with the LCR and its Fourth International, the SWP and its International Socialist Tendency have argued that there is still a fundamental divide between “reform and revolution”, and that it is necessary to build a “revolutionary” party (ie, a party like the SWP). Broader unity projects should be “united fronts” or “coalitions”, like the British Socialist Alliance and Respect.

The experience of Brazil showed - and, in different ways, so do the debates in Rifondazione Comunista and those in the process of Die Linke - that there are present-day choices facing the left about policy, government and coalitions. And these choices still leave sharp differences.

On the one side are those who are willing, for the sake of lesser-evilism or of absolutely marginal advantages to the oppressed, to administer the existing capitalist state as part of the existing international system of states, without fundamental changes. They are therefore prepared to form coalitions with supporters of these systems, in which these supporters can veto policies which are ‘too leftwing’.

On the other side are those who insist that this policy is an illusion that merely prepares the ground for demoralisation among the masses, the advance of the far right, and new further-right centre-right governments. From this perspective, making fundamental changes is the priority of any socialist government. Some, like the SWP, argue that such a government could only come to power through a ‘revolutionary rupture’. Only small and dispersed minorities refuse any coalitions at all, but a significant minority would hold the view that a coalition in which Blair, Schroeder, Prodi or Fabius calls the shots is not worth having and a stance of militant opposition - even if it means militant opposition to a government of the right - is preferable.

Since 2006 the debate in the LCR has moved on. The LCR at its most recent congress voted by a large majority to attempt to construct a new party which is to be a “party of resistance, for a break with the system, for socialism” and which would “counterpose,

against the management of existing institutions, the perspective of a workers' government"¹² This is ambiguous, but a substantial step forward from the terms of the 2006 debate, and there is no point in engaging directly - as I did in the *Weekly Worker* series - either with the stale Eurocommunist crap produced by some of the LCR writers in 2006, or with Alex Callinicos's use in his intervention of the idea that a 'forcible confrontation' is unavoidable to justify the SWP's bureaucratic-centralism. But the broader issues in the debate are still live. How far are the fundamentals of Marx and Engels' political strategy still relevant to us today? What should we maintain, and what should we throw out, from the subsequent elaboration of strategy by socialists and communists from the late 19th to the late 20th century?

This book

The rest of this book is an attempt to tackle these issues. It does not present a CPGB 'party position', but one comrade's attempt to tackle the problem. Chapter one begins to address the problem through the differences between Marxism as a political strategy and the various 'utopian socialist' alternatives. Chapters two and three address the three lines of strategic debate in the late 19th and early 20th century workers' movement and in particular in the Second International. Chapter four addresses the question of war and defeatism, chapter five the split in the Second International and the 'party of a new type', chapter six the Comintern policy of the united front, chapter seven the 'workers' government' slogan, and chapter eight the problem of international working class unity. Chapter nine returns to practical conclusions for the present.

To summarise the argument very much in outline, in the first place I argue that there are solid grounds to maintain the fundamentals of Marx and Engels' political strategy:

- of the self-organisation of the working class;
- for independent *political* action, not just in trade unions and/or cooperatives;
- independent both of the capitalist parties and of the capitalist states;
- on both national and international scales.

As between the strategic lines offered in the Second

International, I argue that the ‘strategy of patience’ of the Kautskyan centre was and is preferable to either the strategy of cross-class ‘left’ coalition government favoured by the right, or the ‘mass strike strategy’ favoured by the left. What was wrong with the Kautskyans, and led in the end to them being subsumed in the right, was their *nationalism* and their refusal to fight for an alternative to the capitalist *state form*.

The remainder of the book addresses the split in the Second International in 1914-18 and the ideas of the early Comintern - and those of the Trotskyists to the extent to which they grow from the ideas of the early Comintern.

I leave on one side the question of imperialism, in spite of its importance. On the one hand, I have discussed it elsewhere in a series of articles in the *Weekly Worker*;¹³ on the other, a full analysis would involve so much political economy as to unbalance this discussion. I also leave on one side the question of ‘permanent revolution’. Insofar as this was a strategy for dealing with *pre-capitalist* states and social formations, it is now effectively moot. Insofar as it is connected to the idea of ‘transitional demands’ and ‘transitional programme’, I have discussed the issue in another *Weekly Worker* series in 2007.¹⁴

The issues therefore come down to: Lenin’s policy of ‘revolutionary defeatism’ in World war I; the split in the Second International and whether (and why) it was justified; the idea of the ‘party of a new type’; the policy of the united front; the slogan of a ‘workers’ government’; and the question of international political organisation, its tasks and nature.

I argue that Lenin’s policy of ‘revolutionary defeatism’ in World War I made sense but has to be grasped accurately and in its context as a proposal for the coordinated action of the workers’ movement on both sides of the war for the immediate struggle for power. The ‘generalisation’ of this policy in the context of colonial wars and its transformation from a strategic line for the immediate struggle for power into a moral imperative, and in particular a moral imperative of ‘wishing for the victory of the other side’, has turned it instead into a new argument for nationalism and class-collaborationism.

I argue that the split in the Second International was justified

- generally because the right wing labour bureaucracies, with the backing of the capitalist state, blocked the left wing from organising openly and fighting openly for their political ideas; and specifically because the individual leading supporters of the war within the workers' movement, who controlled the main parties, were personally scabs who should have been driven out of the movement and war criminals who should have been arrested and jailed. But the *reasoning offered at the time to justify the split* - the ideas of the split as 'purifying' the movement, and of the 'Bolshevik' 'party of a new type' which was necessarily a *minority* party - has been used ever since to justify sect politics.

The concept of a 'party of a new type', I argue, as it developed in 1920-21, reflected the conditions of the civil war in which the Russian CP (Bolshevik) became a political representative of the peasantry, and crushed and replaced the organisational forms of Bolshevism in the period of the political struggle for power in which it came to represent and lead the proletariat. The generalisation of these conceptions in the Comintern had the effect of sterilising the struggle for unity in action through the united front, since it stood as a block against the idea that there could be effective unity in diversity.

The idea of the leading role of the (necessarily minority) party in the dictatorship of the proletariat had the effect of dissolving the fundamental *political* content of the minimum programme and replacing it with a demand for 'trust' in the communist party's individual leaders. The result was that the slogan of a workers' government, which the Comintern advanced in connection with the idea of the united front, became politically empty.

The bureaucratic, top-down 'party of a new type' similarly sterilised the Comintern itself as an international organisation. The end result has been the production of the swarm of Trotskyist international sects. Most of the left has reacted against this form by retreating into nationalism; but, I argue, we do need a genuine organised workers' international.

The final chapter attempts a summary of the main strategic line of the pamphlet and attempts to address the question of 'reform or revolution': I argue that the way in which much of the far left poses

this question draws a false line of divide, while failing to address the *real* line of divide, which is whether to aim for participation in government, or to aim to build a movement of principled *opposition*.

A couple of general points should be made at this stage, since they have caused confusion in the related debate on ‘Marxist party’ in the *Weekly Worker* in 2006-07. The first concerns terminology.

In this book I use ‘Marxist’ in a core sense of meaning the *political strategy* outlined in chapter one, below: that socialism, aka communism, can only arise through the self-emancipation of the proletariat, and that the proletariat can only emancipate itself through fighting for socialism (aka communism); that this activity is at least in some sense international in scope; and that it involves *political action* of the working class. By the ‘Marxist left’ I mean that part of the left which in some broad sense adheres to these ideas, or self-identifies as ‘Marxist’, thus including Kautskyites, ‘official’ communists, Maoists, Trotskyists, ‘left’ and ‘council’ communists.

Another distinct sense of ‘Marxist’ is the theoretical presuppositions which must be true if the strategy is to be defensible. An example: the Mandelites are ‘Marxist’ in the broad sense, but since the 1980s they have defended a concept of ‘alliances’ between the proletariat and other sections of the oppressed which is inconsistent with the conception of the proletariat as the whole social class dependent on the wage fund. If the proletariat is *not* the whole social class dependent on the wage fund, but only waged workers (or, worse, ‘industrial’ or ‘productive’ workers) *any* variant of Marxist political strategy is indefensible.

I use ‘Trotskyist’ more consistently to denote individuals or groups who adhere to the body of ideas which is, broadly, common to the organised Trotskyist movement: that is, ‘Bolshevik-Leninism’ or the ideas of the first four congresses of Comintern, together with world revolution, ‘permanent revolution’, and revolution against the bureaucracy in the Stalinist regimes. This category includes some groups which would not quite self-identify as Trotskyist (notably the British SWP and its international co-thinkers).¹⁵ I do not use it in the sense of ‘any leftist opponent of Stalinism’. Nor do I use it in the sense of the ideas of the early Trotsky in 1904-07, nor of any

hypothetical theoretical elaboration which *might* be made of Trotsky's ideas without accepting the main body of 'Trotskyism'.

I avoid as far as possible using 'Leninism', and where I do use it, it is put in scare-quotes. The reason is that the expression refers to three radically different bodies of ideas. The first is the variant Kautskyism of *What is to be done?*, *One step forward, two steps back* and following texts, and the distinctive theorisation of the Russian Revolution in *Two tactics of social democracy in the democratic revolution* and following texts; and the associated course of action, that Lenin and his co-thinkers (largely) refused to accept the claim of the Mensheviks that they were 'really' the majority and (commonly) insisted on acting on the basis that the Bolsheviks were the majority. This was what Lenin's opponents called 'Leninism' down to October 1917. The second is the actual course of action of the Russian Bolsheviks in the revolution and civil war, as seen by their opponents. The third is the package of retrospective reinterpretation of Lenin's ideas in the light of the actual course of the Russian Revolution down to his death. Of this latter 'Leninism', self-identified Stalinists, official communists who have taken distance from Stalin, Maoists and Trotskyists all have *their own* versions, and to call 'Leninist' the set of Stalinists, Trotskyists and Maoists begs too many questions. I judge that the word simply carries too much freight of approval and disapproval (and of cult of the personality) to be used without question-begging.

In connection with the issue of the 'party of a new type' (chapter five below) it is unavoidable: here 'Leninist' - in scare-quotes - means bureaucratic centralism, or the limited common elements of the concept of the 'revolutionary party' shared by self-identified Stalinists, official communists who have taken distance from Stalin, Maoists, Trotskyists and Bordigists.

The second general point is that this book from beginning to end attempts to discuss the history of the movement's strategic ideas *with the benefit of hindsight*. For example, later in the book when I criticise the arguments and decisions of the leaders of the Russian Revolution, I do not intend by this to pass some sort of moral judgment on the decisions they took under extremely difficult circumstances.

I do not even *necessarily* mean that any superior alternative was open to them. For example, I said above that October 1917 was a gamble on revolution in western Europe, which failed. But the alternative to this gamble put forward by Martov and Kautsky - a Menshevik-SR government based on the Constituent Assembly - was unreal: the real alternative available was either the policy the Bolsheviks actually followed, *including* the coercion of the peasantry to supply food, 'red terror', and so on, or a government of the 'White' generals and 'White terror'. The problem here is not the actions the Bolsheviks took: it is their *over-theorisation* of these actions, which has been inherited by the modern far left.

The use of hindsight is justifiable and necessary, because the point of the whole exercise is to study history for what it can tell us about where we are now, how we got here and where we should (try to) go next. In this sense it is loosely analogous to the sort of exercise that has to be undertaken if a bridge falls down. Why did the bridge fall down? If it was hit by a meteorite, we may well rebuild it in exactly the same form. But if the collapse was caused by problems which will predictably recur in future (like severe storms or an increased weight of traffic) we should redesign the bridge, *in the light of hindsight*, to meet these problems. The fact that the problems which caused the collapse may not have been originally predictable affects the moral responsibility of the original designers, but it does not in the least alter our present tasks.

1

Marxism as a political strategy

The essence of ‘revolutionary strategy’ is its *long-term* character: it is the frame within which we think about how to achieve our goals over the course of a series of activities or struggles, each of which has its own tactics.

We must begin our review of the relevant strategic discussions with those of Marx and Engels and their early co-thinkers, and of the Second International down to the crisis of 1914-18. There are two reasons for this. The first is that in some respects our times are closer to theirs than they are to the ‘short 20th century’. On the one hand, the late 19th and early 20th century was both more ‘globalised’ and more dominated by financial capitals than the period of imperial blocs and wars, and the cold war, which dominated the 20th century. On the other, the first part of the period was one of the scattered forces of the workers’ movement beginning to pull themselves together, either from a low start, or after the defeat of the Paris Commune and of the First International; and this, again, is more like our own times than the period of massively dominant socialist and communist parties.

Secondly, 1918-21 saw the *defeat* of the historic strategic concept of Bolshevism (‘democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry’) as well as those of Trotsky (‘workers’ government supported by the poor peasantry’) and Luxemburg (that the workers’ movement, set free by revolutionary crisis, would solve its own problems). The concrete form of the defeat was that Russia remained isolated.

What happened instead was to render concrete the 1850s

warnings of Marx and Engels against the premature seizure of power in Germany,¹⁶ which formed the basis of Kautsky's 'caution' in the 1890s and 1900s. By choosing to represent the peasantry and other petty proprietors (especially state bureaucrats), the workers' party disabled itself from representing the working class, but instead became a sort of collective Bonaparte.

The Bolshevik leaders could see and feel it happening to themselves,¹⁷ and in 1919-1923 the Comintern flailed around with a succession of short-lived strategic concepts, each of which would - it was hoped - break the isolation of the revolution. These strategic concepts are not simply rendered obsolete by the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The fate of the other 'socialist countries' also proves them to be a strategic blind alley.

When you are radically lost it becomes necessary to retrace your steps. In the present case, this means retracing our steps to the strategic debates of the early workers' movement and the Second International, which defined the strategic choices available to socialists in the early 20th century, and in this sense led to the blind alley of 1918-91.

'Marxism' as a political platform

Marxism as a political position makes some very simple claims, which are very concisely expressed in the preamble to the 1880 *Programme of the Parti Ouvrier*, drafted by Marx:

“That the emancipation of the productive class is that of all human beings without distinction of sex or race;

“That the producers can be free only when they are in possession of the means of production (land, factories, ships, banks, credit);

“That there are only two forms under which the means of production can belong to them:

(1) The individual form which has never existed in a general state and which is increasingly eliminated by industrial progress;

(2) The collective form, the material and intellectual elements of which are constituted by the very development of capitalist society;

“... that this collective appropriation can arise only from the revolutionary action of the productive class - or proletariat - organised

in a distinct political party;

“That such an organisation must be pursued by all the means the proletariat has at its disposal, including universal suffrage which will thus be transformed from the instrument of deception that it has been until now into an instrument of emancipation ...”¹⁸

This line can be seen as a strategy from two different angles. It is a strategy for the emancipation of the working class, through collective action for communism. It is a strategy for the emancipation of “all human beings without distinction of sex or race”, or for communism, through the emancipation of the working class.

This single/double strategy is the long-term goal pursued by Marx and Engels from the time of the *Communist manifesto*. The rest of their work - Marx’s critique of political economy, the development of ‘historical materialism,’ etc - consists of *arguments for* this strategy.

The *Programme of the Parti Ouvrier* contains a single additional element: that the proletariat must be “organised in a distinct political party”.

A ‘Marxist’ party, then, consists in principle of *nothing more than* a party which is committed to the ideas that the working class can only emancipate itself - and humanity - through struggling for communism, and that the struggle for communism can only be victorious through the action of the working class.

I use ‘communism’ here *not* to mean the ideas of ‘official’ communism or even the early Comintern, but rather the counterposition made much earlier by Marx and Engels in the *Communist manifesto*: communism implies overcoming the state, nationality, and the family as an economic institution,¹⁹ as opposed to ‘socialism’, which is statist and nationalist and can be feudal-reactionary.

To call a party ‘Marxist’ thus does not in the least entail that it should be, for example, a Trotskyist party. A party which held to the strategic line of Kautsky’s *Road to power* (without the political conclusions of Kautsky’s theoretical statism and nationalism, which flowered more fully in his later work) would still be a Marxist party.

The state and the nation

There are, however, two additional elements of strategy which can be found in Marx and Engels' writings, which are not in the *Programme of the Parti Ouvrier*, but follow from the fundamental claims.

The first concerns the question of the state. Both Marx's famous and Engels' less famous critiques of the 1875 Gotha programme of the unification of the German socialist parties are emphatic that the workers' movement must not propose dependence on the existing state or the "free state".²⁰ It should be emphasised that this is *not* a matter of making the overthrow of the existing state the precondition for all else. The *Programme of the Parti Ouvrier* mostly consists of partial demands consistent with the survival of capitalism. Both Marx and Engels, in criticising the Gotha programme, insist that compromises of expression for the sake of avoiding prosecution are perfectly acceptable; the fundamental problem they see in the draft in this respect is that it miseducates the workers by promoting *dependence on the state* (state aid, state education, etc).

The second is that the proletarian class is an international class and the proletarian movement is necessarily an international movement. This was again a strong strain in the critiques of the Gotha programme and was already present in the *Communist manifesto*. It follows logically from the international character of ... *capitalism*.

Thus Marx in the *Critique of the Gotha programme*: "It is altogether self-evident that, to be able to fight at all, the working class must organise itself at home *as a class* and that its own country is the immediate arena of its struggle - insofar as its class struggle is national, not in substance, but, as the *Communist manifesto* says, 'in form'. But the 'framework of the present-day national state' - for instance, the German empire - is itself, in its turn, economically 'within the framework' of the world market, politically 'within the framework' of the system of states. Every businessman knows that German trade is at the same time foreign trade, and the greatness of Herr Bismarck consists, to be sure, precisely in his pursuing a kind of *international policy*."²¹

Beyond these points, for Marx and Engels and their co-thinkers,

all else is tactics, whether it is trade union struggles, standing in elections, legality and illegality, insurrections, street-fighting and/or guerrilla warfare.

Class

Widely defended arguments suggest that the core claim of Marxism - that the struggle for communism is the struggle for the emancipation of the working class and that the emancipation of the working class can only be achieved through the struggle for communism - is false. Instead, the struggle for the emancipation of the working class is *part only* of the struggle for human liberation: “Relations of oppression or exploitation arising from patriarchy, humanity’s predatory conduct towards the rest of the biosphere, racism, the denial of political and individual freedom, choice of sexual orientation or minority cultures” are equally important and cannot be “mechanically transferred back to the resolution of the central economic conflict.” And perhaps “growing complexity and fragmentation of societies” leads *inter alia* to “a weakening of the feeling of belonging to the working class and a spatial deconstruction of labour, which makes more fragile the forms of organisation of the traditional labour movement and encourages a decline in unionisation” (both from Cedric Durand in the 2006 LCR debate).

These are very widespread views on the left; but they are mistaken.

It is possible to respond to them by pointing out that working class self-identification is as much a subjective as an objective reality, as Callinicos did in the 2006 LCR debate, and by pointing to the political futility displayed in Britain by supporters of these ideas. It can be added that the “growing fragmentation of labour” has *not* shown any tendency to recreate genuine petty family production: on the contrary, this continues to retreat globally. What it *has* recreated is widespread employment in relatively small workplaces. These were the conditions of the 19th century workforce - under which Chartism, the early trade union movement, the First International and the early socialist parties were created.

The implication, then, is not ‘good-bye to the working class’,

but, rather, that the *means of struggle* need to change: they need to shift from *workplace* collective organisation to *district* collective organisation. It is also that trade unions need to become again - as Marx called them - an alliance of the employed and the unemployed;²² and one which performs significant welfare and education functions rather than simply being an instrument of collective bargaining on wages and conditions.

At a more fundamental level of theory, the authors of the *Programme of the Parti Ouvrier* could neither have claimed that “the emancipation of the productive class is that of all human beings without distinction of sex or race”, nor that the working class needs a “distinct *political party*” if they had believed that the working class is what Eurocommunists and other theorists of ‘beyond the working class’ have argued.

It is not the employed workers’ strength at the point of production which animated Marx and Engels’ belief that the key to communism is the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat and vice versa. On the contrary, it is the proletariat’s *separation from the means of production*, the impossibility of restoring small-scale family production, and the proletariat’s consequent *need for collective, voluntary organisation*, which led them to suppose that the proletariat is a potential ‘universal class’, that its struggles are capable of leading to socialism and to a truly human society.

This is both a positive judgment and a negative judgment. On the side of the positive judgment, it is true that the defeats the workers’ movement has suffered since the new ‘roll-back’ offensive of capital began in the late 1970s give superficial reasons for doubt and despair. But even amid these defeats and in defeated struggles, the working class has shown the ability to draw in behind it all the oppressed and exploited in struggles like the 1984-85 miners’ strike in Britain, while new movements - often unexpected by the left - have arisen and shaken local states, as, again in the 1980s, in Brazil, South Korea and South Africa. These, too, have run into the sand. But the whole history of the workers’ movement - before Marx and Engels as well as after - is not one of continuous advance but of advance and retreat. The present retreats do not in themselves give grounds for supposing

‘good-bye to the working class’.

The negative judgment consists in the proposition that, however weak the workers’ movement, general human emancipation on the basis of petty family property and production is impossible and hence the idea of this or that section of the petty proprietors, or the undifferentiated ‘people’, serving as a revolutionary subject is illusory. This judgment was founded on the whole history of radical movements down to Marx and Engels’ time. It has been emphatically confirmed in the 20th century - by, precisely, the defeats suffered by the workers’ movement through submerging itself in a ‘worker-peasant alliance’, ‘national movement’ or ‘broad democratic alliance’.

The most serious of these defeats is Stalinism itself. Stalinism did *not* take and hold power in the name of the dictatorship of the proletariat over the other classes. It took it in the name of the worker-peasant alliance and held it in the name of a ‘socialism’ in which the obvious existence of classes in the Stalinist states was denied.

The negative judgment is also demonstrated in a different way by the fact that the ‘social movements’ on which authors of this type place so much emphasis are themselves a broken reed. The ‘women’s movement’ in the US and Britain, where it began, has since the later 1970s been so divided by class, race, sexuality and politics as to be no more than an ideological expression. The same is true *a fortiori* of the ‘lesbian and gay movement’.

What began in the 1960s-70s as a common movement against racism has long splintered into a mass of much smaller ethnic and religious constituencies asserting individualised forms of identity politics. One group of elders, imams, etc are preferred interlocutors of the state; another layer of the ethnic minorities has entered into the business and professional classes; neither represents the youth, who periodically take to the streets.

‘Green politics’ in its broadest sense is another alternative favoured by advocates of the end of class politics. Yet it is even clearer than in the other ‘social movements’ that greens are forced to choose between one or another form of economic organisation.

They are divided and unable to give a lead to society as a whole because they are unable to choose collectively one way or the other.

And when a ‘distinctively green’ policy is produced, it offers precisely the reactionary utopia of a return to petty family production - or in extreme cases (‘deep greens’), the death of the vast majority of the present world human population in order to return to an idealised version of hunter-gatherer societies.²³

Party

The idea that the working class needed to unite and organise for *political* action - action at the level of the state, addressing the society as a whole - was inherited by Marx and Engels from Chartism. It was opposed by the Proudhonists, who advocated simply building a co-operative movement. It was opposed by the Bakuninists in the name of revolutionary spontaneity, direct action and the revolutionary general strike.²⁴

The definition of the proletariat by its *separation from* the means of production (as opposed to peasants and artisans) means that the proletariat as a class includes the whole class - employed and unemployed, men, women and children - which is dependent on the wage fund. This, in turn, means that, though trade unions are one of the most immediate forms of worker organisation, it is only *party* organisation - organisation based in the working class *districts*, and tackling all the aspects of the experience of the class - which is really capable of expressing the unity of the class as a class, its independent interests, its existence as a class ‘for itself’. It is party organisation which can embed the particular trade union struggles in the solidarity of the broader masses and legitimate them against the attempts of the bosses to isolate them and present them as sectional claims.

In Britain in the recent past those Labour ward branches which had significant roots withered away, the Eurocommunists destroyed the old CPGB, and the Trotskyists were unable, due to their syndicalist-sectionalist sectarianism, to rebuild an alternative. This left the rank and file trade union militants isolated, exposed and demoralised in the face of the Thatcherite offensive. This was demonstrated positively in the 1984-85 miners’ strike by the ability of the strike to generate very broad solidarity, since it was based in mining *communities* rather than simply the pits, and was fought in the interests of the unemployed

and children as well as presently employed workers. It was demonstrated negatively in the same struggle. The Eurocommunists removed the party key to the trade union and Labour broad left, and supported their Labour co-thinkers, the later Blairite ‘soft left’. As a result, the broad mass sentiment of solidarity had no political channels to flow into generalised active resistance to the government. *A movement without a political party is not enough.*

More immediately, as Callinicos quite correctly pointed out in his intervention in the 2006 LCR debate, the Social Forums were in reality created by a party - the Brazilian Workers Party - and the European Social Forum was primarily animated by Rifondazione Comunista and to a considerable extent populated by party activists wearing one or another ‘social movement’ hat. *A movement ‘without political parties’ will rapidly prove to be illusory.*

This, of course, leaves on one side the question: what sort of party? In a sense, this was already debated between Marx and Engels and their co-thinkers on the one hand, and the Lassalleans and Bakuninists on the other. But *systematic* argument - and the disastrous errors of Stalinism and Trotskyism on the question - belong to the strategies of the 20th century.

State and nation

Another common argument is that the possibilities of working class political action have been reduced by the decline of the nation-state and emergence of transnational governance structures, and the internationalisation of production. But in truth, what’s new here? After all, I have quoted Marx, above, writing in 1875, as saying that “the ‘framework of the present-day national state’ - for instance, the German empire - is itself, in its turn, economically ‘within the framework’ of the world market, politically ‘within the framework’ of the system of states”.

A second wave of ‘globalisation theorists’, indeed, have moved beyond the idea that globalisation is something radically new, to the idea that it is a return in some sense to the economic-political characteristics of the late 19th century.²⁵ They may like this or dislike it, but the fact remains that the *nationalisation* of production and

exchange within competing trade blocs in the mid-20th century and the ‘managed trade’ of the cold war period were innovations in relation to the period when Marx and Engels wrote.

Something has indeed changed. What has changed is that the foundations of a series of *illusions* about working class strategy are gradually being destroyed. The system of rival imperial trade blocs promoted the illusion that a really autarkic national economic and political regime was possible. The grand example of this illusion was the Soviet Union. After World War II, US imperialism’s policy of the ‘containment’ of ‘communism’ led it, first, not to attempt immediately the reconquest of the USSR but to cooperate in the bureaucracy’s self-blockade and, second, to make economic and political concessions both to its former rivals in Europe and Japan, and to nationalists in the semi-colonial/former colonial countries. The effect of all three was indirect concessions to the working classes. This, too, in the period 1948-79 promoted the idea that the working class (or the oppressed peoples) could achieve permanent gains through the nation-state and within the existing nation-state system.

After the disasters, from their point of view, of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the US turned to a policy of rolling back both ‘communism’ and the concessions made to other states and to the working class. Among the critical instruments of this shift have been the ideology and promotion of ‘human rights’, free marketeering and conservative NGOs as instruments for regime change, and the more aggressive deployment of international institutions (IMF, WTO, etc, etc). The result is to reduce nation-states’ room for manoeuvre and their willingness to make concessions to the local working class.

The strategic implication is that against the internationally coordinated action of the capitalists, the working class needs to develop its own internationally coordinated action. Marx and Engels criticised the Lassalleans - and hence the Gotha programme - for putting their faith in the nation-state and (a corollary) putting off the internationally coordinated action of the working class - international strikes, etc - to an indefinite future of the ‘brotherhood of peoples’. The evidence both of the ‘short 20th century’ and of the beginning of the 21st is utterly overwhelming in favour of the correctness of

this criticism and the strategic stance it expresses.

‘Unity is strength’

In 1875 the German socialists made a choice with which Marx and Engels disagreed: to unify their forces on the basis of a programme which had a ‘diplomatic’ character and obscured their differences. The fusion happened at just the right time: the process of German unification under Prussian leadership was accelerating, and the German economy had arrived at industrial take-off. In consequence the unified Social Democratic Party of Germany (SDP) was immensely successful, growing in the later 19th and early 20th century to a vast and deeply rooted system of mass organisations.

The result was that the principle of unity at all costs became generalised and incorporated into the strategy of the socialist movement. Unifications and attempts to unify divided forces were promoted in France, Italy and elsewhere. The 1904 Congress of the Second International voted to call on divided socialist organisations in individual countries to unify. Supporters could point to the awful example of disunited and hence ineffective socialist movements in Britain, the USA and - perhaps surprising to modern far-left eyes - Russia.

Were the leaders of the Second International correct to incorporate the principle of unity at all costs into their strategy? The answer is complex and will require consideration of the great split during and immediately after 1914-18, the Comintern’s party concept, and the ‘united front’ policy. But some assessment can be made of the elementary idea.

The positive effects of broad unity - in substance a ‘snowball effect’ - were demonstrated in the rise of the SDP and, more broadly, the Second International. They have been reconfirmed positively by the growth of the communist parties in their ‘popular front’ periods, and more recently by the successes of such unitary attempts as the Brazilian Workers Party, Rifondazione’s opening to the Italian far left groups and Scottish Militant Labour’s creation of the Scottish Socialist Party.

They have been reconfirmed negatively by the incapacity of the

splintered Trotskyist and Maoist left to get beyond small squabbling groups: the SWP, in spite of its feigned lofty indifference to the groups smaller than itself, is perceived by the broad masses as being in the same league as them, and the same is true of the larger groups in every country. Even the LCR and Lutte Ouvrière, with approx 5% of the votes each in the 2002 presidential election, have been held back from a real breakthrough by their disunity.

On the other hand, in a certain sense the European working class in 1914-18 paid the price of 'unity at all costs'. It did so not at the outbreak of war, when the leaders were carried along by the nationalisms of the mass of the class, but when the character of the war became clear, as the statist-nationalist right wing held the whip hand over an anti-war left which was afraid to split the movement. Rather similarly, Chinese workers in 1927, Spanish workers in 1937-39, French workers in 1940, Indonesian workers in 1965 and Chilean workers in 1973 paid a savage price for the communist parties' policy of 'unity at all costs'.

More immediately, it is far from clear that the Gotha policy actually succeeded in 'overcoming' the differences between Eisenachers and Lassalleans. By the 1890s, the SDP had escaped from illegality and reached a size at which attitudes to the state and to government participation (at least in the provinces) became a live issue. The question of the state, government, coalitions and socialist strategy then resurfaced for debate in the SDP and (in varying forms) across the Second International. The questions were not posed in identical forms to the differences between Eisenachers and Lassalleans, but their underlying principle was common.

Around the turn of the 19th and 20th century we can identify roughly three 'strategic hypotheses' in the socialist movement. The right wing is traditionally identified with reference to Eduard Bernstein's *Evolutionary socialism*,²⁶ though it in fact included various forms of 'pure trade unionist' politics, ethical socialism and so on. The centre can be identified roughly with reference to Karl Kautsky's (relatively late) *The road to power*.²⁷ The left can similarly be identified, even more roughly, and equally on the basis of a late text, with Rosa Luxemburg's *The mass strike, the political party*

*and the trade unions.*²⁸ “Even more roughly” because Luxemburg’s position is in some respects intermediate between the Kautskyites and the core of the left. Both the content of the debate in the Second International and its limitations are essential if we are to understand modern strategic questions rather than merely repeating old errors.

2

Reform coalition or mass strike?

In chapter one I discussed the idea that Marxism itself is a strategy - for the emancipation of the working class, through collective action for communism; and for the emancipation of “all human beings without distinction of sex or race” - ie, for communism - through the emancipation of the working class. I drew out some corollaries of this strategic concept: on the one hand, rejection of dependence on the existing state, and, on the other, the need for the working class to organise and act internationally *before* the arrival of ‘the revolution’ or the socialist millennium.

I also discussed the choice made by the socialists of, first, the German SPD and, later, the Second International to prioritise the unity of the movement above all else. I concluded that the diplomatic formulation of the Gotha programme and the general principle of unity at all costs had not succeeded in suppressing strategic debate, and the core of the ‘problem of strategy’ began to be addressed in the debates between the right wing of the movement, the Kautskyan centre, and the leftist advocates of a ‘strategy of the general strike’.

These tendencies *drew on* debates which had already begun. The ‘general strike strategy’ was a variant form of positions which had already been argued by the Bakuninists in the 1870s and were still maintained by anarcho-syndicalists.²⁹ The policy of the right had indirect roots in the Lassalleans’ policy of demanding that the German imperial state support the workers against the capitalists; its more immediate root was the (successful) coalition policy of SPD regional leaders in southern Germany, which Engels criticised in *The peasant question in France and Germany* (1894).

The Kautskyan ‘centre’ position took its starting point from Marx and Engels’ polemics both against the anarchists at the time of the split in the First International, and against the coalitionism of the precursors of the right. But, though Kautsky (with a bit of arm-twisting from Engels³⁰) had published Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha programme*, he had by no means internalised Marx and Engels’ criticisms of that programme. Kautsky’s first draft of the 1891 Erfurt programme was subject to some similar criticisms from Engels,³¹ and, in the German and international centre tendency, Kautsky was allied both with the true author of the Gotha programme, Wilhelm Liebknecht, and with open Lassalleans like Mehring.

The right: reform v ‘utopianism’

The underlying common idea of the right wing of the movement was that the practical task of the movement was to fight for reforms in the interests of the working class. In order to win these reforms, it was necessary to make coalitions with other tendencies which were willing to ally with the workers’ movement. And in order to make coalitions, it was necessary in the first place to be willing to take governmental office: it was by creating a coalition *government* that the possibility really arose of legislating in the interests of the working class, as well as of administrative measures (creating social security systems, etc).

Secondly, it was necessary to be willing to make substantial political compromises. Thus Engels, in *The peasant question*, polemicised against Vollmar’s programmatic concessions to the peasantry in relation to positive subsidies for family farming and in relation to trade union issues affecting agricultural labourers employed by small farmers.

The largest compromise - but, from the point of view of the right, the smallest - would be for the workers’ party to abandon its illusory and futile revolutionism; and, with it, equally illusory Marxist claims about crisis, and the notion that in an economic downswing reforms, as concessions made to the working class, would tend to be taken back unless the working class took political power into its own hands.

In the view of the right, the revolutionism was, after all, already

empty of content. The German party, for example, did not call openly for the replacement of the monarchy by a republic and, though the Erfurt programme contained a good set of standard democratic-republican demands (for example, universal military training, popular militia, election of officials, including judges, and so on),³² these played only a marginal role in the party's agitational and propaganda work.

The claim that economic downswing would produce attacks on concessions already made could perfectly well be conceded by rightists as true *of the bourgeoisie*; but the argument that this was also true *of the state* depended on the claim that the state was a class instrument in the hands of the bourgeoisie, and was thus intertwined with revolutionism.

The right did not simply argue that getting rid of revolutionism would make the workers' party into a respectable party with which other parties could do business, and which could therefore achieve coalitions, and hence concessions. It also offered a variety of theoretical objections to Marx and Engels' arguments, based on christianity, Kantianism, nationalism and early appropriations of the marginalist economists' critiques of Marx. A relatively sophisticated version was Bernstein's *Evolutionary socialism*, which argued that the scientific approach of Marx and Engels was diverted by their residual Hegelianism into a utopian revolutionism.

The actual content of the various theoretical objections to Marxism need not be considered here. The core question is the relative value of Marxist and 'constitutionalist' arguments in terms of predictive power and, hence, as a guide to action. To address this question it is necessary to separate the rightists' positive claim - that coalitions based on programmatic concessions can win real reforms - from their negative claim, that 'revolutionism' is unrealistic, worthless and illusory.

The right's positive claim

It should be said right away that the positive claim is true, to the extent that we are willing to treat partial gains for particular groups of workers (eg, workers in Britain; or workers in industry; or in particular industries) as gains for the working class as a whole.

This does not, in fact, depend on the workers' party being a minority party and hence in need of formal coalitions. If the workers' party presents itself purely as a party of reform, it will also win members and voters from the existing parties of reform. It may then, like the British Labour Party after 1945, become a party which is in form a workers' party capable of forming a government on its own, but is in reality *in itself* a coalition between advocates of the independent political representation of the working class on the one hand, and liberal or nationalist-statist reformers and political careerists on the other: to use Lenin's very slippery expression, a "bourgeois workers' party".

The positive claim is, however, illusory as strategy. Part of this illusory character is due to the fact that the negative claim is false. But part of it is internal. The policy of coalitions based on programmatic concessions is, as I said earlier, based on the need to form a coalition *government* in order to get effective reforms. But this supposes from the outset that reforms will take the form of state action to ameliorate the situation of the workers. The reform policy is therefore a policy for the growth and increasing power of the state and increased state taxation: as the Conservative press puts it, for the "nanny state".

The internal problem is that working class people are no more fond of being in perpetual parental leading-reins from the state than the middle classes: the aim of the *emancipation* of the working class is an aspiration to collective and individual freedom. The policy of reform through coalition governments therefore contains within itself - quite apart from the falsity of the negative claim - the seeds of its own overthrow. The petty tyrannies of the council house manager, the social services officials, the benefit officials, etc, become the ground of a conservative/liberal reaction against the "nanny state" *among important sections of the working class*.

This is not merely a British phenomenon (the Thatcher victory in 1979). It was seen in the largest possible scale in the fall of the Stalinist regimes in 1989-91. And it has characterised the French, German and Italian electoral cycles and those of Australia, Canada and the US at least since the 1970s (in the case of the US, the

Democrats play the role of the reformists).

The right's negative claim

The predictive failure of the reformists' negative claim results, most fundamentally, from the national limit of its horizons. Capitalism forms itself, from its beginnings, as a global socioeconomic formation. It is an international greasy-pole hierarchy of competing firms. Within this formation the nation-state is unavoidably a firm, and there is also a hierarchy of competing states. The understanding that the nation-state is a firm competing in the world market is a trivial commonplace of modern capitalist politics: the need to preserve or improve 'British competitiveness' is a constant mantra of both Labour and Tories, and equivalents can be found in the major parties of every country. It also forms part of Marx's criticism of the Gotha programme (quoted in chapter one). To form a *government* within this framework therefore necessarily commits the participants to manage the interests of the nation-state in global competition.

Success in this competition allows the basis for reforms in the interests of the *national* working class. Or, more exactly, of *sections* of the national working class: there are always groups (particularly workers in small firms, young workers, migrants, etc) who must be excluded for the sake of compromise with the middle class parties, as Engels predicted in criticising Vollmar. But success is not 'purely economic'. Capitals are able to externalise the costs of economic downswing onto weaker *states* and the firms (and landlords, petty producers, etc) associated with these states. Competition on the world market is thus *military-political-economic*.

The policy of reform through coalition governments thus entails (a) the displacement of the downswing of the business cycle onto the weaker states and their firms and populations; and (b) the displacement of the social polarisation which capitalism produces onto polarisation *between nations*. On the one hand, this gives the reformists' negative claims their credibility: reforms are actually achieved and social polarisation is reduced in the successful states. On the other, the reformists necessarily commit themselves to sustaining and managing an *imperial* military force.

Sentimental objections to imperialism and foreign adventures, and the residual commitment to the ideas of universal military service and a people's militia, inevitably give way, once reformists are actually in government, to the hard needs of sustaining the state's success and standing in the global hierarchy, which is the only means by which reforms can be sustained.

Even this success at the price of bloody hands cannot forever be sustained, because externalising the business cycle has its own limits. As a world top-dog state, like Britain or the US, and the lead industrial sectors associated with this state, enter into decline, the externalised downswing phase of the business cycle returns, affecting not only them, but the other states near the top of the global hierarchy. Competition between these states intensifies. As a result, if the state as a firm is to remain globally competitive, it must endeavour to take back the reforms which have been given and drive wages and working conditions down towards the global average (their true market value). The project of reform through coalition government thereby comes to offer 'reformism without reforms' or merely the 'less bad' (Blair in preference to Major, and so on).

But every other state is also doing the same thing and, the more they do it, the more global effective purchasing power declines, forcing more attacks ... in reality, this is merely the downswing of the business cycle postponed. It is accumulated in time and displaced onto a global scale, returning as global market pressure on the nation-state. The downswing of the ordinary business cycle must end in bankruptcies, which both free productive capital from the claims of overproduced fictional capital to income, and devalorise overinvested physical capital. It is the bankruptcies which free up space for a new economic upswing.

In the same way, the global downswing must end in the destruction of the global money and property claims of the declining world hegemon state: Britain in 1914-45; the US at some point in this coming century. In its (ultimately futile) efforts to put off this result, the declining world hegemon state must respond by an increased exploitation of its financial claims and its military dominance - as Britain did in the later 19th century, and as the US is doing now. The deferred

and transposed business cycle can only overcome this problem by ending in war.

At the point of global war between the great powers, the illusory character of the policy of reform through coalition government becomes transparent. All that maintains the reformists are mass fear of the consequences of military defeat, and direct support from the state in the form of repression of their left opponents. Thus both 1914-18 and 1939-45 produced major weakening of the reform policy within the workers' movement and the growth of alternatives. In the event, after 1945 the destruction of British world hegemony enabled a new long phase of growth, and reformism was able to revive. We are now on the road to another collapse of reformist politics ... but what is lacking is a strategically plausible alternative.

The left: 'All out for ...'

The alternative offered by the left wing of the Second International was the 'strategy of the mass strike'. The idea was an elementary one. In the first place, the strike weapon had been and remained at the core of the effectiveness of trade union struggles for immediate demands. Secondly, the struggle for the International itself was intimately connected with the struggle for May Day - waged through international one-day strike action - from its founding Congress in 1889.

The proposal of the left was that the International could take the political initiative by *extending* the use of the strike weapon in support of the demands of the minimum programme. As the working class was increasingly able to win victories by this weapon, its confidence and political self-assertiveness would grow, culminating (perhaps) in a general strike which challenged for power - either demanding the transfer of political power to the working class or (in the most Bakuninist form) immediately beginning the creation of the new society out of the free cooperation begun in the strike movement.

A range of theoretical grounds have been offered for this strategic line, from theoretical anarchist reasonings, through varieties of Hegelian Marxism, to - more recently - interpretations of Trotsky's *Transitional programme*. As with the right, the theoretical arguments

need not be considered here. Like that of the right, the strategic line of the left involved both a positive predictive claim and a negative one. The negative claim was that the method of electoral struggle and coalitions - or even the effort to build permanent mass workers' organisations, as opposed to *ad hoc* organisations of mass struggle like strike committees - necessarily led to corruption of the workers' representatives and organisations and the evolution of these organisations into mere forms of capitalist control of the working class. The positive claim was that the method of the strike struggle could be extended and generalised. Experience has something to tell us about the value of these claims.

The left's negative claim

The negative claim may, on its face, appear to be amply proved by the experience of the 20th century. It is certainly true of the policy of reform through coalition governments, for the reasons given above. On the experience of the 20th century, it appears to be *also* true of the 'Leninist party', which claimed to escape it. Those communist parties which took power became corrupt apparatuses tyrannising over the working classes of their countries, and most have ended in a return to capitalism, while most of the 'official' CPs of the capitalist countries have become simple reformist parties of the kind advocated by the right wing of the Second International. The groups to their left have, to the extent that they have attained mass support, gone down the same path and, to the extent that they have not, have in the main become fossilised sects; in either case, characterised internally by the petty dictatorship of the party bureaucracy.

The trouble is that if the left's negative claim is taken seriously to simply true, it is self-defeating. If any effort to organise outside strikes leads to corruption, *nothing* can be done until the masses move into a mass strike wave, because to organise in any other situation would imply the struggle for reforms, including electoral activity, coalitions, and organisational forms which turn out to be corrupt. Unfortunately, however - as we will see in a moment - when a mass strike wave does break out, this in itself immediately poses the questions of government and forms of authority. Under these

conditions, the unorganised advocates of the mass strike as an alternative to permanent organisation and the struggle for reforms are marginalised by the organised parties. Like the Russian anarchists in the summer and autumn of 1917, the anarchist CNT trade union confederation in the Spanish revolution, the Bolivian Trotskyists in 1951 and the Portuguese far left in 1974-76, they will be driven to give support to *some* contender for governmental power, and lose any political initiative.

What I have just said is, in fact, no novelty. It is the substance of Marx and Engels' objection to the Bakuninists' general strike strategy, expressed (among other places) in Engels' *The Bakuninists at work* (1873).³³ The Bakuninists 'rejected authority' - offering, in relation to the First International, an early form of the idea that organising and fighting for reforms leads to corruption, and advocating a form of general strike strategy. When the revolutionary movement in Spain allowed them to seize power in some localities in 1873, the result of their 'rejection of authority' was alliance with localist forces, leading to an inability to take any coordinated action to resist the counteroffensive of the military-clerical right wing against the republicans.

The underlying problem is that 'authority' is, at bottom, merely a means of collective decision-making. To 'reject authority' is therefore to reject collective decision-making and - in the end - render yourself powerless. The existing social structures of authority then reassert themselves. In the end, anarchists have themselves discovered this, in Jo Freeman's famous pamphlet *The tyranny of structurelessness* (1970).³⁴ It happens just as much within small anarchist organisations (the 'existing social structures of authority' then being gender and class hierarchy) as in mass workers' parties.

The almost uniform failure, by processes of bureaucratisation and corruption, of workers' and socialist parties, big and small, tells us that we *have not solved* the problem of what sort of authority - that is, what sort of mechanisms of decision-making - will serve the interests of the working class. It also tells us that it is absolutely urgent to do so; and that the standard Trotskyist response, originated by Trotsky himself, that "the party 'regime' is not a political question",³⁵

is profoundly false. The ‘party regime’ is inevitably the image of the sort of regime we are fighting for.

But the proposition that the tyranny of structurelessness leads to the reaffirmation of the existing social structures of authority is true not only of groups and parties, but also of mass strike movements and revolutionary crises - as the examples given above show. When we see *why* this is the case, we will also see why the positive side of the ‘mass strike strategy’ turns a partial truth into a strategic falsity.

The left’s positive claim

Let us imagine for a moment a general strike which is both truly general (everyone who works for a wage withdraws their labour) and indefinite, to continue until certain demands are met, happening in a fully capitalist country like Britain. Power supplies are cut off, and with them water supplies and the telephone system. No trains or buses run, and no petrol can be obtained except from small owner-run petrol stations; this soon runs out. The supermarkets are closed, and no deliveries are made to those small owner-run shops that remain open. The hospitals and doctors’ surgeries are closed.

It should at once be apparent that this cannot continue for more than a few days. If the result is not to be general catastrophe, the workers need not simply to withdraw their labour, but to organise positively to take over the capitalists’ facilities and run them in the interests of the working class. A truly all-out indefinite general strike, therefore, immediately demands the effective *de facto* expropriation of the capitalists. As a result, it at once poses the question: will the state protect the capitalists’ property rights? In other words, it poses the question of political power.

Now, of course, what the advocates of the mass strike strategy were calling for was not such a truly all-out indefinite general strike called by the political party. The reality of mass strike movements is something a great deal more messy, of the sort described, for Russia, in Luxemburg’s *The mass strike*, but seen since then in many different countries at different times.³⁶ The political regime falls into crisis. Some spark sets off the mass movement. Rather than a single, planned, truly all-out, indefinite general strike, there is a wave of mass

strikes - some protest actions for political demands; some partial struggles for economic demands. They begin to overlap and are accompanied by political radicalisation.

But a movement of this sort *still* poses the question of political power, and for exactly the same reasons. A mass strike wave disrupts normal supply chains. This can be true even of a strike in a single industry, like the miners' strikes in Britain in 1972 and 1974. Equally, however, the capitalists' property rights are, from their point of view, not merely rights to things, but rights to the streams of income (ie, of social surplus product) which can be made to flow from the social relations which ownership of these things represents. The strike is therefore *in itself* an interference with their property, and a mass strike wave threatens the security of their property. They begin to disinvest, and to press the state for stronger action against strikers.

The economy begins to come unravelled. The loss of the normal (capitalist) mechanisms of authority (decision-making) impacts on the broad masses in the form of dislocation and shortages of goods. A strike wave or revolutionary crisis can last longer than a truly all-out indefinite general strike, but it cannot last longer than a period of months - at most a couple of years. In this situation, if the workers' movement does not offer an alternative form of authority - alternative means of decision-making which are capable of running the economy - the existing social structures of authority are necessarily reaffirmed. Either the military moves in (Spain in 1873-74 and 1936, etc) or the reformists, put in power, re-establish capitalist order (Ebert-Scheidemann in 1918; everywhere in Europe in the immediate aftermath of World War II; in a much weaker sense, the 1974-79 Wilson-Callaghan government in Britain).

The 'mass strike strategy' thus precisely fails to resolve the strategic problem of authority which the negative aspect of the left's approach - the critique of the struggle for reforms - posed.

All power to the soviets?

Lenin in 1917 believed that the Russian working class had found in the soviets - workers' councils - the solution to the strategic problem of authority posed by the mass strike movement. Growing out of the

strike movement itself, the soviets created a form of authority which shared the characteristics of democracy and accountability from below which Marx described in the Paris Commune. Communism could therefore take the political form of the struggle for soviets and for soviet power.

In fact, as I have argued before, this belief was illusory.³⁷ Almost as soon as the Bolsheviks had taken power, they were forced to move from a militia to a regular army, and with it came logistics and the need for a state bureaucracy. The soviets and militia *could not* perform the core social function of the state, defending the society against external attack. The problem of authority over the state bureaucracy was unsolved. Lenin and the Bolsheviks fell back on the forms of authority in their party and, as these proved a problem in the civil war, almost unthinkingly militarised their party and created a corrupt bureaucratic regime.

But ‘All power to the soviets’ was also illusory in another sense. Even before they withered away into mere fronts for the Russian Communist Party, the soviets did not function like parliaments or governments - or even the Paris Commune - in continuous session. They met discontinuously, with executive committees managing their affairs. Though the Bolsheviks took power in the name of the soviets, in reality the central all-Russia coordination of the soviets was provided by the political parties - Mensheviks and SRs, and later Bolsheviks. It was *Sovnarkom*, the *government* formed by the Bolsheviks and initially including some of their allies, and its ability to reach out through the Bolshevik Party as a national organisation, which ‘solved’ the crisis of authority affecting Russia in 1917.

Subsequent history confirms this judgment. Workers’ councils and similar forms have appeared in many strike waves and revolutionary crises since 1917. In none have these forms been able to offer an alternative centre of authority, an alternative decision-making mechanism for the whole society. This role is unavoidably played by a government - either based on the surviving military-bureaucratic state core, or on the existing organisations of the workers’ movement.

In Cuba, for example, the overreaction of the Batista regime to

a small guerrilla organisation, the July 26 Movement, in November 1958 triggered a general strike which brought the regime down. The ensuing two years saw a succession of government arrangements and a continuing wave of action by the working class in various forms. The end result was a party-state regime formed by the merger of a minority of the July 26 Movement with the much larger Popular Socialist Party (Communist Party). It was the PSP which, in the end, provided the alternative centre of authority.

I do not mean by this to glorify the bureaucratic outcomes of the dictatorship of the ‘revolutionary’ party either in Russia or in Cuba. The point is simply that the problem of decision-making authority is not solved by the creation of workers’ councils arising out of a mass strike movement. Hence, the problem of institutional forms which will make authority *answerable to* the masses needs to be addressed in some way other than fetishism of the mass strike and the workers’ councils.

Present relevance

The falsity of the line of ‘All power to the soviets’ brings us momentarily back to the 2006 debate in the French Ligue. At least some in the Ligue recognised the falsity of their variant of ‘All power to the soviets’ - the ‘organs of dual power’ line of the Tenth Congress of the Mandeliste Fourth International (or, as LCR authors Artous and Durand put it, the strategy of the insurrectionary general strike). But then the question is, *what* strategy? Durand offered a version of Eurocommunism, and this was itself a variant of the positions argued by Bernstein and the right wing of the Second International. We have seen in this chapter that this is no strategy either.

We should also have seen that the problem with both strategies centres on the questions of government as a central coordinating authority, and the role and structural forms of the bureaucratic-coercive state. The right sought to form governments based on the existing state; the left adopted a strategy which, at the end of the day, evaded the whole problem of state authority. In truth, these issues, originally debated between the 1870s and 1900s, are live, unresolved questions in today’s politics. In the next chapter we will see what, if

anything, the centre tendency in the Second International led by Karl Kautsky has to teach us on these issues.

3

The revolutionary strategy of the centre

The centre tendency in the German Social Democratic Party and Second International was also its ideological leadership. In spite of eventually disastrous errors and betrayals, this tendency has a major historical achievement to its credit. It led the building of the mass workers' socialist parties of late 19th and early 20th century Europe and the creation of the Second International. The leftist advocates of the mass strike strategy, in contrast, built either groupuscules like the modern far left (such as the De Leonists) or militant but ephemeral movements (like the Industrial Workers of the World).

Down to 1914, Russian Bolshevism was a tendency *within* the centre, not a tendency opposed to it - even if Kautsky preferred the Mensheviks. Without the centre tendency's international unity policy there would have been no RSDLP; without the lessons the Bolsheviks learned from the international centre tendency, there could have been no mass opening of the Bolshevik membership in 1905, no recovery of the party's strength through trade union, electoral and other forms of low-level mass work in 1912-14, and no Bolshevik political struggle to win a majority between April and October 1917.

The centre tendency did not, of course, identify itself as such. It self-identified as the continuators and defenders of 'orthodox Marxism' against 'anarchists' (to its left, but not in the centre's view) and 'revisionists' to its right. In this sense it was primarily defined by negative judgments on the coalition strategy of the right and the mass strike strategy of the left. Both Kautsky's *The social revolution* (1902) and his *The road to power* (1909) are extremely cautious in making positive categorical predictive claims about strategy. There

are nonetheless some core principled understandings about strategy which emerge from the arguments.

Organisation

For the centre tendency, the strength of the proletariat and its revolutionary capacity flows, not from the employed workers' power to withdraw their labour, but from the power of the proletariat as a class to *organise*. It is organisation that makes the difference between a spontaneous expression of rage and rebellion, like a riot, and a strike as a definite action for definite and potentially winnable goals.

Moreover, as soon as we move beyond craft unionism, which relies on skills monopolies to coerce the employer, the difference between victory and defeat in a strike is the ability of the solidarity of the class as a whole to sustain the strikers in the face of the economic and political pressure the employers can exert. Finally, it is the need and (potential) ability of the proletariat as a class to organise democratically when we enter into a mass strike wave or revolutionary crisis that represents the *potential* alternative authority to the authority of the capitalist class.

Proletarian organisation need not only be deployed in the form of strike action. Solidarity and the power to organise can also create cooperatives of various sorts, workers' educational institutions, workers' papers, and workers' political parties: and it can turn out the vote for workers' candidates in public elections. Strong votes for a workers' party will increase the self-confidence and sense of solidarity of the working class as a class and its ability to organise and act, not just electorally but in other arenas of struggle, such as strikes, for example.

The core of the political strategy of the centre tendency was to build up the workers' organised movement, and especially the workers' political party as its central institution. In their view, as the *organised movement* of the working class grew stronger, so would the self-confidence of the class and its ability to take political decisions and impose them on the bourgeoisie and the state. *Both* in the struggle for reforms *and* in mass strike waves or revolutionary crises, a powerful mass party of the working class which had at the core of

its aims the perspective of the working class taking power and overcoming the regime of private property would be the essential instrument of the working class asserting an alternative form of authority.

It is important to be clear that the movement that the centre tendency sought to build was *not* the gutted form of the modern social-democracy/Labourism, which is dependent on the support of the state and the capitalist media for its mass character. The idea was of a party which stood explicitly for the power of the working class and socialism. It was one which was built up on the basis of its own resources, its own organisation with local and national press, as well as its own welfare and educational institutions, etc.

This view was a direct inheritance from Marx and Engels' arguments from the time of the First International onwards. The Hegelian-Marxists, who claimed that it was an undialectical vulgarisation of Marx and Engels, faced with the historical evidence, logically had to conclude that Engels had vulgarised Marx. But this has been shown by Draper and others to be false.³⁸

The self-emancipation of the majority

The second central feature of the strategic understandings of the centre tendency was that the socialist revolution is necessarily the act of the majority. This is fairly elementary and fundamental Marxism: it formed the basis of Marx and Engels' opposition to various forms of socialist putschism and support for enlightened despots.³⁹ The object of the socialist revolution is precisely the *self*-emancipation of the working class majority and through this the emancipation "of all human beings without distinction of sex or race".⁴⁰ The idea that this can be accomplished through the action of an enlightened minority is a self-contradiction.

The centre tendency drew two conclusions from this understanding - against the left, and against the right. The first was rejection of the mass strike strategy. On this issue, the centre presented the anarcho-syndicalists and the left with a version of Morton's Fork. The first limb of the fork was that a true general strike would depend on the workers' party having majority support if it was

to win. But if the workers' party already had majority support, where was the need for the general strike? The workers' party would start with its electoral majority as a mandate for socialism, rather than with the strike. It was for this reason that the centre, in Bebel's resolution at the 1905 Jena Congress of the SPD, was willing to demand the use of the mass strike weapon in defence of, or in the struggle for, universal suffrage.

The second limb of the fork was that the strategy of the working class coming to power through a strike *wave* presupposed that the workers' party had *not* won a majority. In these circumstances, for the workers' party to reach for power would be a matter of 'conning the working class into taking power'. However formally majoritarian the party might be, the act of turning a strike wave into a struggle for power would inevitably be the act of an enlightened minority steering the benighted masses.

The argument against the right was also an argument against minority action - but minority action of a different kind. The right argued that the workers' party, while still a minority, should be willing to enter coalition governments with middle class parties in order to win reforms. The centre argued that this policy was illusory, primarily because the interests of the middle classes and those of the proletariat were opposed. Behind this argument was one made by Marx in 1850, that it would be a disaster for the workers' party to come to power on the back of the support of the petty proprietors, since the workers' party would then be forced to represent the interests of this alien class.

"We are devoted to a party which, most *fortunately* for it, cannot yet come to power. If the proletariat were to come to power the measures it would introduce would be petty-bourgeois and not directly proletarian. Our party can come to *power* only when the conditions allow it to put *its own* view into practice. Louis Blanc [French socialist who participated in a republican coalition government in 1848] is the best instance of what happens when you come to power prematurely."⁴¹

This logic applied all the more to the creation of a coalition government with the political representatives of the petty proprietors. By becoming part of such a coalition, the workers' party would in

practice accept responsibility for the petty-proprietor government. Again, the opposition to participating in coalitions as a minority was no novelty, but followed arguments already made by Marx and Engels. Thus, for example, Engels wrote to Turati in 1894, anticipating a possible Italian (democratic) revolution:

“After the common victory we might perhaps be offered some *seats in the new government* - but always in a *minority*. *Here lies the greatest danger*. After the February Revolution in 1848 the French socialistic democrats ... were incautious enough to accept such positions. As a minority in the government they involuntarily bore the responsibility for all the infamy and treachery which the majority, composed of pure republicans, committed against the working class, while at the same time their participation in the government completely paralysed the revolutionary action of the working class they were supposed to represent.”⁴²

This is a hard judgment, but it is one which has been repeatedly confirmed by history. Participation by communists in nationalist and ‘democratic’ governments, and ‘critical support’ policies, animated by the desire to ‘do something for the workers’, has in the course of the 20th century brought on the workers’ movement in several countries disasters far worse than those of 1848: the fates of the mass Indonesian, Iraqi and Iranian communist parties spring to mind. The effect of the coalition policy can be not merely defeat, but the destruction of the very idea of socialism and working class politics as an alternative to the capitalist order.

Patience

The centre’s strategic line was, then, a strategy of patience as opposed to the two forms of impatience; those of the right’s coalition policy and the left’s mass strike strategy. This strategy of patience had its grounds in the belief that the inner-logic of capital would inevitably tend, in the first place, to increase the relative numbers and hence strength of the proletariat as a class, and, in the second, to increase social inequality and class antagonism. Kautsky makes the argument most clearly in *The social revolution*. In this situation the workers’ party/movement could expect to build up its forces over the

long term to a point at which it would eventually be able to take power with majority support.

This strategic line can be summed up as follows. Until we have won a majority (identifiable by our votes in election results) the workers' party will remain in opposition and not in government. While in opposition we will, of course, make every effort to win partial gains through strikes, single issue campaigns, etc, including partial agreements with other parties *not amounting to government coalitions, and not involving the workers' party expressing confidence in these parties.*

When we have a majority, we will form a government and implement the whole minimum programme; if necessary, the possession of a majority will give us legitimacy to coerce the capitalist/pro-capitalist and petty bourgeois minority. Implementing the whole minimum programme will prevent the state in the future serving as an instrument of the capitalist class and allow the class struggle to progress on terrain more favourable to the working class.

I have left on one side the question of imperialism, which I discussed at considerable length in a series in the *Weekly Worker* in July-August 2004. As I indicated there and in chapter two, it has significant implications for the centre tendency's strategy of patience. The inherent tendency in capitalism towards social polarisation is partially displaced from the imperialist countries onto the colonial countries.

In particular, the material division of labour on a world scale results in a proportional increase in the professional, managerial and state official middle classes in the imperialist countries - a phenomenon observed by Hobson of south eastern England and then in Lenin's *Imperialism*, and one which has been considerably more marked in the period since 1945. An increasing proportion of the total population of the imperialist countries becomes wholly or partly dependent on the spoils of empire. The version of the strategy of patience adopted by the SPD/Second International leadership depends on the workers' party actually achieving an electoral majority. But the economic and social effects of imperialism in the imperialist countries mean that this is unlikely in any single imperialist country and outside of

conditions of acute political crisis.

The state

What distinguished the centre tendency from post-1917 communists most fundamentally was the belief that the working class could take over and use the existing capitalist state bureaucratic apparatus, a view developed most clearly in Kautsky's *The road to power*. This, too, had its roots in claims made by Marx and - particularly - Engels.

In *The civil war in France* Marx had asserted precisely that the working class "cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes," and had proposed the Commune as a model of the future workers' regime.⁴³

In the first draft of *The civil war in France*, indeed, Marx had characterised the Commune by saying that "This was, therefore, a revolution not against this or that, legitimate, constitutional, republican or imperialist form of state power. It was a revolution against the state itself, of this supernaturalist abortion of society, a resumption by the people for the people of its own social life."⁴⁴

In an April 1871 letter to Kugelmann, Marx wrote: "If you look at the last chapter of my *Eighteenth Brumaire* you will find that I say that the next attempt of the French revolution will be no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic-military machine from one hand to another, but to *smash* it, and this is essential for every real people's revolution on the continent"⁴⁵

But that was in the first flush of the revolutionary movement. Later, in the aftermath of the Commune, the Bakuninists argued that the mass strike revolution was to *abolish* the state. In response to the uselessness of the Bakuninists' line, Marx and - in particular - Engels 'bent the stick' against it in a number of texts.

In *On authority* (1872), Engels uses a series of arguments for the need for authority (ie, collective decision-making mechanisms) in modern cooperative production.⁴⁶ But he explains them in a very unqualified way, which makes no distinction between the *temporary* subordination of one individual to another which is unavoidable in collective decision-making, and the *permanent* division of labour between managers and grunts which characterises both capitalist

(and other class), and bureaucratic, regimes. Engels' arguments in this respect were to be used both by Kautsky against the left, and by Lenin in the 1918-21 process of construction of the bureaucratic regime in Russia.

Engels' 1891 afterword to *The civil war in France* is a little more ambiguous on 'smashing up' the state than Marx's letter to Kugelmann: "In reality, however, the state is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another, and indeed in the democratic republic no less than in the monarchy; and at best an evil inherited by the proletariat after its victorious struggle for class supremacy, *whose worst sides* the proletariat, just like the Commune, *cannot avoid having to lop off* at the earliest possible moment, until such time as a new generation, reared in new and free social conditions, will be able to throw the entire lumber of the state on the scrap-heap" (emphasis added).⁴⁷

In Engels' 1895 *Introduction* to Marx's *Class struggles in France, 1848-1850* we find Engels asserting that: "With [the SPD's] successful utilisation of universal suffrage, however, an entirely new method of proletarian struggle came into operation, and this method quickly took on a more tangible form. *It was found that the state institutions, in which the rule of the bourgeoisie is organised, offer the working class still further levers to fight these very state institutions.* The workers took part in elections to particular diets, to municipal councils and to trades courts; they contested with the bourgeoisie every post in the occupation of which a sufficient part of the proletariat had a say. And so it happened that the bourgeoisie and the government came to be much more afraid of the legal than of the illegal action of the workers' party, of the results of elections than of those of rebellion" (emphasis added).⁴⁸

It is clear from Engels' correspondence in 1895 that he did not by any means intend to rule out illegal or forcible action, and was exasperated at the SPD leadership's use of the *Introduction* to suggest that he did.⁴⁹ But this does not alter the significance of the positive arguments, only part of which have been quoted here.

Theory

Behind these ambiguities is a problem of theory.⁵⁰ Marx and Engels had started out with an appropriation and ‘inversion’ of Hegel’s theory of the state: Hegel saw the state as growing out of the internal contradictions of ‘civil society’ (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*); Marx and Engels identified *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* with capitalism. But they became conscious that the state as a social form in general is historically prior to the emergence of capitalism. In *The civil war in France*, Marx projects the rise of capitalism back onto the emergence of the *absolutist* state in the phase of the decline of feudalism.

Behind the argument of *The civil war in France* is, in fact, an earlier understanding that *absolute monarchy* must be broken by revolution. In *England’s 17th century revolution* (1850) Marx and Engels wrote that “Although M Guizot never loses sight of the French Revolution, he does not even reach the simple conclusion that the transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy can take place only after violent struggles and passing through a republican stage, and that even then the old dynasty, having become useless, must make way for a usurpatory side line.”⁵¹

Marx’s 1871 letter to Kugelmann similarly refers to the need to smash the state “on the continent” (ie, as opposed to Britain and the US). Engels’ 1891 critique of the Erfurt programme makes a similar distinction: “One can conceive that the old society may develop peacefully into the new one in countries where the representatives of the people concentrate all power in their hands, where, if one has the support of the majority of the people, one can do as one sees fit in a constitutional way: in democratic republics such as France and the USA, in monarchies such as Britain, where the imminent abdication of the dynasty in return for financial compensation is discussed in the press daily and where this dynasty is powerless against the people. But in Germany where the government is almost omnipotent and the Reichstag and all other representative bodies have no real power, to advocate such a thing in Germany, when, moreover, there is no need to do so, means removing the fig-leaf from absolutism and becoming oneself a screen for its nakedness.”⁵²

Marx’s late work found in the *Ethnological notebooks*

indicates that he recognised the insufficiency of this account, which ties the state to early modern absolutism. In *The origins of the family, private property and the state*, Engels' "execution of a bequest" of Marx's anthropological work, Engels identifies the origins of the state with the break-up of clan society in antiquity: the social contradictions which produce the state are then given by the emergence of full alienable private property and classes.

The result, both in Marx's *Civil war in France* version and in Engels' *Origins* version, is that capitalism inherits "the state" from the prior social orders. It is then rational to suppose that socialism (either as the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', or as the 'first phase of communism'), will inherit "the state" from capitalism.

What is missing is a general theory which will explain *why* the absolute monarchies had to be 'smashed' in order for fully capitalist states to emerge, in a process which was completed in the Netherlands in 1609 and England in 1688, but was not completed until 1871 in France and 1918 (and perhaps even 1945) in Germany.

But such a theory should also explain why the late antique state had to be 'smashed' in order for feudal state regimes to emerge, in a process completed in the former western Roman empire over the 7th-11th centuries, but which in Byzantium failed, ending in the *conquest* of the still stubbornly late antique state by the Ottoman regime in 1453. Similarly, in China a regime very similar to the late antique state recapitulated itself on changes of dynasty until it finally fell in the 1911-12 revolution, but in Japan such a state was 'smashed' in the 12th century, opening the way to a feudal development.

Such a theory could not properly stop at the immediate outcome, the particularity of the late feudal bureaucratic-coercive state and its relationship to capitalism. Nor could it stop at the beginning, at the absolute generality of the emergence of the state in connection with the transition to class society (which was probably in Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, China, India and Mesoamerica rather than, as Engels placed it in *Origins*, in Greek and Roman classical antiquity). It would have to grasp the relation of concrete state *forms* (city-state and god-empire, national kingdom as part of a larger religious unity, rule-of-law constitutional state as part of a system of

states) to their class bases (slavery, feudalism, capitalism).

In approaching the matter in this way, it would become visible that Engels' 1891 judgment that in France, the USA and England "the representatives of the people concentrate all power in their hands, [and], if one has the support of the majority of the people, one can do as one sees fit in a constitutional way" was false. The inner secret of the capitalist state form is not 'bourgeois democracy'. Rather, it has three elements: 1. the 'rule of law' - ie, the judicial power; 2. the deficit financing of the state through organised financial markets; and 3. the fact that capital rules, not through a single state, but through an international *state system*, of which each national state is merely a part.

This, in turn, carries the implication that Engels' 1891 critique of the SPD's failure in the Erfurt Programme to call for the democratic republic was true but insufficient, and that his 1895 claim that "It was found that the state institutions, in which the rule of the bourgeoisie is organised, offer the working class still further levers to fight these very state institutions" was misconceived.

In the absence of an explicit democratic-republican critique of the state hierarchy forming part of the SPD's *agitation*, the party's participation in the local and sectoral governmental organs of the German Second Empire served, not to undermine the imperial state, but to integrate the workers' movement behind that state and to support the development of bureaucratic hierarchies within the workers' movement.

The problem of failure to grasp the character of the nation-state system as part of an international state system and subject to the world market was one the centre shared with the right wing, and was more profoundly disastrous than the failure to grasp the problem of the class character of state forms. It, too, has its origins in Marx and Engels.

The nation-state

"Though not in substance, yet in form, the struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie is at first a national struggle. The proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own

bourgeoisie” (*Communist manifesto*).

There is a peculiarity about this statement. Early in the *Manifesto*, we are told: “To this end, Communists of various nationalities have assembled in London and sketched the following manifesto, to be published in the English, French, German, Italian, Flemish and Danish languages.” The ideas of Marx and Engels reflected in the *Manifesto*, moreover, could be said to be drawn from the appropriation and critique of German philosophy, English political economy (and Chartism, though Lenin left this source out), and French utopian socialism.⁵³ Moreover, what immediately followed (not, of course, as a result of the *Manifesto*) was the outbreak of an *international* revolutionary wave affecting France, Germany, Austria, Hungary.

Indeed, *previous* (bourgeois) revolutionary movements had also been international: the Europe-wide commune movement of the 12th and 13th centuries, 16th-17th century protestantism (in particular Calvinism) and Enlightenment republicanism of the 18th and early 19th centuries. Future, more proletarian, revolutionary waves were also to be international in character, as in the rise of class struggles which led up to the 1914-18 war, those of the end and immediate aftermath of that war, the aftermath of 1945, and the late 1960s-early 1970s.

True, in the *Critique of the Gotha programme* Marx wrote: “It is altogether self-evident that, to be able to fight at all, the working class must organise itself at home *as a class* and that its own country is the immediate arena of its struggle - insofar as its class struggle is national, not in substance, but, as the *Communist manifesto* says, ‘in form’.” But he went on, however, to criticise the programme for saying “Not a word, therefore, about the international functions of the German working class! And it is thus that it is to challenge its own bourgeoisie - which is already linked up in brotherhood against it with the bourgeois of all other countries - and Herr Bismarck’s international policy of conspiracy.”⁵⁴

Engels’ contemporaneous critique in a letter to Bebel has a similar insistence both on the workers’ party initially organising nationally, and on its underlying international content: “There was, of

course, no need whatever to mention the International as such. But at the very least there should have been no going back on the programme of 1869, and some sort of statement to the effect that, *though first of all* the German workers' party is acting within the limits set by its political frontiers (it has no right to speak in the name of the European proletariat, especially when what it says is wrong), it is nevertheless conscious of its solidarity with the workers of all other countries and will, as before, always be ready to meet the obligations that solidarity entails.

Such obligations, even if one does not definitely proclaim or regard oneself as part of the 'International', consist for example in aid, abstention from blacklegging during strikes, making sure that the party organs keep German workers informed of the movement abroad, agitation against impending or incipient dynastic wars and, during such wars, an attitude such as was exemplarily maintained in 1870 and 1871, etc."⁵⁵

The growth of the SPD, however, gave rise to a shift in Engels' attitude. An increased emphasis was placed on the defence of Germany as the country in which the workers' movement was strongest. In 1891 the initial emergence of an alliance of France with Russia threatened a war in which Germany might be attacked on two fronts (as, in the event, happened in 1914).

Engels wrote to Bebel that "we must declare that since 1871 we have always been ready for a peaceful understanding with France, that as soon as our Party comes to power it will be unable to exercise that power unless Alsace-Lorraine freely determines its own future, but that if war is forced upon us, and moreover a war in alliance with Russia, we must regard this as an attack on our existence and defend ourselves by every method ..."

And "if we [Germany] are beaten, every barrier to chauvinism and a war of revenge in Europe will be thrown down for years hence. If we are victorious our party will come into power. The victory of Germany is therefore the victory of the revolution, and if it comes to war we must not only desire victory but further it by every means."⁵⁶

The same position was publicly adopted by Bebel on behalf of the SPD, and Engels published it (as his own opinion) in France.⁵⁷

With this we have arrived at the position which the SPD took up in August 1914. It is, in fact, dictated by the inner logic of the combination of the claims that “the proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie” and that the (nation-) state is “an evil inherited by the proletariat after its victorious struggle for class supremacy”. In August 1914 these commitments left the centre as badly enmeshed in the defence of ‘national interests’ as the right, and led them to support feeding the European working class into the mincing machine of the war.

Dialectic

It is a commonplace of the far left, following hints from Lenin elaborated by Lukacs and others, to accuse Kautsky in particular and the centre in general of an insufficient grasp of dialectic. I have argued against this approach before.⁵⁸ In particular, it is clear that Kautsky and his immediate co-thinkers did not imagine an uninterrupted social peace which would allow the SPD to progress without crises and setbacks, and that they did grasp that history moves *both* in a slow molecular fashion *and* in an accelerated and chaotic fashion in periods of crisis.

The trouble was that their errors on the state and the nation-state rendered this understanding useless when it came to the test of war. They were to have the same result in the revolution of 1918-19 and when, in 1931-33, the SPD was confronted with the rise of Nazism.

The centre’s strategy of patience was more successful than the other strategies in actually building a mass party. Its insistence on the revolution as the act of the majority, and refusal of coalitionism, was equally relevant to conditions of revolutionary crisis: the Bolsheviks proved this positively in April-October 1917, and it has been proved negatively over and over again between the 1890s and the 2000s. However, *because* it addressed neither the state form, nor the international character of the capitalist state system and the tasks of the workers’ movement, the centre’s strategy collapsed into the policy of the right when matters came to the crunch.

4

War and revolutionary strategy

I wrote in chapter one that the strategic debates of the late 19th century workers' movement are more relevant to the modern workers' movement than those of the Third International, in the first place because our times are closer to theirs than they are to the "short 20th century" (Hobsbawm), and secondly because at least some of the strategic concepts of the Comintern are not simply rendered obsolete by the fall of the USSR, but are proved by the fate of the 'socialist countries' to be a strategic blind alley.

Nonetheless, we cannot splice the film of history to skip a century. Nor can we simply argue, as Antoine Artous did in the 2006 LCR debate, that "the current period is characterised by the end of the historical cycle which began with October 1917".

We live *after* the great schism in the socialist movement which resulted from the 1914-18 war. Most of the organised left and a good many 'independents' still identify with traditional ideas derived from the first four congresses of the Comintern (usually in a diluted and confused form).

Moreover, the Comintern re-posed the problems of the state and internationalism, party organisation, unity and government coalitions. Any judgment on possible socialist strategies for the 21st century must take the Comintern's ideas into account, even if in the end it proves necessary to reject some or all of them.

Strategic alternatives

There are three core elements of strategy proposed by the Comintern and its leadership. The first, and the essence of the split, was Lenin's

response to World War I - the idea of a defeatist policy.

The second was the idea of the split itself. This started with the notion that organisational separation from the right, and the creation of a new type of International and a new type of party, would immunise the workers' movement against repeating the right's betrayals. In 1921-22 it became apparent to the Comintern's leadership that the right and centre could not be so easily disposed of, and the strategic problem of workers' unity (and the question of government) re-posed itself in the form of the united front policy. But this policy stood in contradiction to the concept of the party established in 1920-21 and proved short-lived.

The third was the problem of what form of authority could pose an alternative to the capitalist political order. Beginning with 'All power to the soviets', the Comintern leadership had shifted by 1920 to the idea that the dictatorship of the proletariat was necessarily the dictatorship of the workers' vanguard party. The united front turn of 1921-22 entailed a shift here as well, to the ideas of a workers' or workers' and farmers' government as the *immediate* alternative to capitalist rule.

In this chapter I will discuss the question of war and revolutionary defeatism. This question comes first. Hal Draper has argued that Lenin was wrong on defeatism. If the strategic judgment expressed in 'defeatism' was wrong, Lenin was also wrong to argue for a split with the anti-war centrists.

War and betrayal

In August 1914 the parliamentary representatives of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the majority of the larger parties of the Second International in the belligerent countries voted for war credits for their national governments. In doing so, they betrayed commitments which had been made at the 1907 Stuttgart and 1912 Basel congresses of the International.

If the war had appeared, as Engels imagined it in 1891, as a revanchist attack by France on Germany with Russian support, and had been fought on German soil, the defencist policy of the SPD might have been vindicated. However, the partial success of the Schlieffen

plan to outflank the French armies by attacking through Belgium, and the weakness of the tsarist army, meant that the war was not fought on German soil. Moreover, both the long background of rising inter-imperialist tensions, and the immediate diplomatic context (German support of an Austrian ultimatum against Serbia for ‘supporting’ what would now be called ‘terrorism’), made German policy appear aggressive, not defensive.

On the other hand, had the Schlieffen plan succeeded in rapidly knocking France out of the war, the war would indeed have been - as many military leaders imagined it would be in 1914 - a short one, and the error of the socialist leaderships would have been marginalised by the political consequences in the defeated belligerent countries (France and Russia).

But the Schlieffen plan did not work as intended. Invading France through neutral Belgium provided an excuse for British intervention on the French side; and the German forces outran their rail-based logistics and became overextended, enabling the French army to regroup forces and at the first battle of the Marne (September 1914) to strike at a weakness in the German line. The result was that France was not knocked out of the war, Britain became fully engaged in it, and there developed the stabilised trench lines of the various fronts, factories of murder which were to run for another four years. The socialist leaderships had ended up accepting responsibility for an enormous crime against the working class and humanity in general.

Peace and unity or civil war and split?

Lenin argued from the outbreak of hostilities for a clear assessment that this was a predatory imperialist war for the redivision of the world, an understanding shared by Luxemburg, Trotsky and others.⁵⁹ On this basis it was to be regarded as reactionary on all sides. This, in turn, led Lenin to support the policy that came to be called ‘defeatism’ and for the slogan ‘Turn the imperialist war into a civil war’. With equal determination he argued for a decisive break with the right wing, and, indeed, from all those socialists who supported their own governments in the war.⁶⁰

A section of the left and centre endeavoured in vain to restore

the honour of the socialist movement by convening the Zimmerwald (1915), Kienthal (1916) and Stockholm (1917) conferences of socialists to promote a peace policy. As the true nature of the war became clear, elements of the centre who had initially gone along with the right turned to an anti-war policy; but they still clung to the idea of re-establishing the unity of the International. Lenin now argued for a decisive break with the anti-war centre as well as the right, on the basis that the centre's pacifist line merely covered for the right.

A left wing at the Zimmerwald conference argued for a policy of pursuing the class struggle against the war; the Bolsheviks participated. But even among the Zimmerwald left the instinct for unity of the movement was strong, and Lenin argued even for a break with those elements of the left who were unwilling to split from the centre. There could be no real internationalism, he insisted in this context, without a willingness to carry on a practical struggle against one's own state's war policy: that is, defeatist propaganda in the armed forces.

Until the October Revolution, it is fairly clear that Lenin could not carry the full rigour of his line within the Bolshevik leadership. The public statements of the Bolshevik Party in Russia were anti-war and characterised the war as imperialist and predatory, but did not go to the full lengths of defeatism. The Bolsheviks were equally unwilling to break decisively with the limited unity expressed in the Zimmerwald and Kienthal conferences and call openly for a new International, or - the other aspect of Lenin's insistence on a clear split - to rename the RSDLP (Bolshevik) the Communist Party.⁶¹

Lenin's line was given strong apparent justification by the course of events. On the one hand, the October Revolution, plus the new regime's ability to hold power into 1918, seemed to confirm the claims of defeatism positively. On the other, the responses of the Russian, German and international right and centre to the February and October revolutions and the 1918-19 revolution in Germany seemed to negatively confirm the need for a rigorous split. A large enough minority of the parties of the Second International (including majorities in France and Italy) was willing to split from the right, to support the proclamation of the Third International in 1919.

The 21 conditions

Even so, the concerns for the broad unity characteristic of the Second International persisted within some of the parties affiliated to the Third. The Russian leadership resolved to force a cleaner break with the centre tendency and did so with the 1920 adoption by the Second Congress of the *Twenty-one conditions* for affiliation to the Comintern.⁶² The defeatist position was not adopted in explicit terms, but the political essence of the content Lenin had intended by it was.

Condition six provided that “It is the duty of any party wishing to belong to the Third International to expose, not only avowed social-patriotism, but also the falsehood and hypocrisy of social-pacifism...”

Condition four required that “Persistent and systematic propaganda and agitation must be conducted in the armed forces, and communist cells formed in every military unit. In the main communists will have to do this work illegally; failure to engage in it would be tantamount to a betrayal of their revolutionary duty and incompatible with membership in the Third International.”

And condition eight required that “Any party wishing to join the Third International must ruthlessly expose the colonial machinations of the imperialists of its ‘own’ country, must support - in deed, not merely in word - every colonial liberation movement, demand the expulsion of its compatriot imperialists from the colonies, ... and *conduct systematic agitation among the armed forces against all oppression of the colonial peoples*” (emphasis added).

Hal Draper

Hal Draper has argued in his *Lenin and the myth of revolutionary defeatism* that Lenin’s use of ‘defeat’ slogans in 1914-16 reflected his general tendency to ‘bend the stick’: “He makes perfectly clear what he means, but that is how he seeks to underline, with heavy, thick strokes, the task of the day, by exaggerating in every way *that* side of the problem which points in the direction it is necessary to move *now*.” In Draper’s view, the resulting slogan was incoherent and mistaken, and Lenin, when he was required to formulate slogans for practical purposes, did not use it. He argues that it ceased to be employed altogether in 1917 and through the early years of the

Comintern, and was only revived by Zinoviev in 1924 as a club with which to beat Trotsky.

Draper is usually an exceptionally careful scholar, and his work on Marx and Engels' ideas in *Karl Marx's theory of revolution* brilliantly draws out the political context of specific writings and arguments in order to make the underlying ideas clear. In *Lenin and the myth of revolutionary defeatism*, however, Homer has nodded. Missing from Draper's argument about defeatism are two crucial elements.

The first is that the primary political context is Lenin's argument for a clear split in the International - with the right, *and with anyone who wanted to maintain unity with the right, in particular with the centre*. This is the precise context of, for example, Lenin's polemic against Trotsky on the defeatism formula. And it is retained in condition six of the *Twenty-one conditions* (a document whose whole purpose is to finalise the split with the Kautskyite centre).

The second is the concrete conclusion which follows from defeatism. That is, that the socialists should, so far as they are able, carry on an anti-war agitation in the ranks of the armed forces. In November 1914 Lenin wrote: "Refusal to serve with the forces, anti-war strikes, etc, are sheer nonsense, the miserable and cowardly dream of an unarmed struggle against the armed bourgeoisie, vain yearning for the destruction of capitalism without a desperate civil war or a series of wars. *It is the duty of every socialist to conduct propaganda of the class struggle, in the army as well*; work directed towards turning a war of the nations into civil war is the only socialist activity in the era of an imperialist armed conflict of the bourgeoisie of all nations."⁶³

In July 1915, in arguing, against Trotsky, for "practical actions leading toward such defeat", Lenin comments as an aside: "For the 'penetrating reader': This does not at all mean to 'blow up bridges', organise unsuccessful military strikes, and, in general, to help the government to defeat the revolutionaries."⁶⁴

But neither here nor anywhere else does Lenin repudiate carrying on anti-war agitation in the ranks of the armed forces, and, on the contrary, this is the principal concrete conclusion which follows

from defeatism. And this, too, is retained in the *Twenty-one conditions*, in conditions four (a general obligation to organise and agitate in the armed forces) and eight (specifically on the colonial question).

To carry on an effective agitation against the war in the ranks of the armed forces is, unavoidably, to undermine their discipline and willingness to fight. This was apparent in 1917 itself. It is confirmed by subsequent history. One of the few effective anti-war movements in recent history was the movement in the US against the Vietnam war. If we ask *why* this movement was successful, the answer is clear: it did not merely carry on political opposition to the war (demonstrations, etc) but also disrupted recruitment to the US armed forces and organised opposition to the war *within* the armed forces. The result - together with the armed resistance of the Vietnamese - was a US defeat.

It is clear enough that these judgments were intended to be strategic. The Zimmerwald left proposed a resolution condemning the imperialist character of the war and arguing (in a slightly less emphatic way than Lenin's version) for class struggle against it. An opponent, Serrati, argued that this resolution would be rendered moot by the end of the war (still anticipated in 1915 to be not far off). Lenin responded that "I do not agree with Serrati that the resolution will appear either too early or too late. *After this war, other, mainly colonial, wars will be waged.* Unless the proletariat turns off the social-imperialist way, proletarian solidarity will be completely destroyed; that is why we must determine common tactics. If we adopt only a manifesto, Vandervelde, *L'Humanité* and others will once again start deceiving the masses; they will keep saying that they, too, oppose war and want peace. The old vagueness will remain" (emphasis added).⁶⁵

Right or wrong, then, Lenin's defeatism was arguing for two fundamental changes in the strategy of international socialism. The first was for a clear split: the abandonment of the historic policy of unity of the movement at all costs which had flowed from the success of the Gotha unification, the SPD and the unifications which it had promoted.

The second was a new strategic policy in relation to war, or, more exactly, in relation to imperialist wars. This policy called for an open proclamation along the lines that ‘the main enemy is at home’, to ‘turn the imperialist war into a civil war’ and, complementing this, practical efforts to undermine military discipline by anti-war agitation and organising in the armed forces.

Limits of defeatism

Draper’s view is that the defeat *slogan* is simply wrong - meaningless unless you positively wish for the victory of the other side. It must follow that unless you support such a scenario, you would not go beyond a slogan along the lines of ‘Carry on the class struggle in spite of the war’. That is, you would not arrive at Lenin’s argument that the principal *way* to carry on the class struggle in such a war is to argue that civil war is better than this war and to undermine military discipline by anti-war agitation and organisation in the armed forces.

The flip side of this argument is that Draper only partially addresses the internal limits of Lenin’s argument. Lenin argued for generalising a defeat position to all the 1914-18 belligerents on the basis that 1914-18 was a war *among the imperialist robbers for division of the spoils of the world*. He - and the Comintern - further generalised this position to ‘colonial wars’: that is, the wars of the imperialist states to acquire and retain colonies and semi-colonies.

They did *not* argue that communists in the colonies and semi-colonies should be defeatist in relation to these countries’ wars for independence/against the imperialists. On the contrary, in this context the third and fourth congresses of Comintern urged the policy of the anti-imperialist front. I argued in my 2004 series on imperialism that the course of events since 1921 has proved that the policy of the ‘anti-imperialist front’ is not a road to workers’ power and socialism.⁶⁶ That does not alter the point here that the dual-defeatist policy is *specifically designed for particular political conditions, those of inter-imperialist war*.

Pretty clearly, it is, in fact, more specific than Lenin realised; but it also contains underlying elements of general strategic principle, which need to be teased out of the specificity.

Draper makes the point that when Lenin returned to Russia he found that it was necessary to address mass defencism among workers and soldiers, and the defeat slogan disappeared *as a slogan* from Lenin's writings after April 1917. What is missing in Draper's account is that Bolshevik anti-war agitation and organisation among the soldiers did not disappear after April. But the disappearance of the defeat *slogan*, and the mass defencism, were real. Mass defencism reflected the fact that as the war had evolved, it had become mainly a war fought on Russian soil, which Russia was losing. The masses could see perfectly well that the liberty they had won in February would not survive German occupation.

The same issue was posed a great deal more sharply in 1939-45. World War II was indeed a second inter-imperialist war for the redivision of the world. But overlaid on this war was a class war against the proletariat and its organisations, begun with Hitler's 1933 coup, continued with German intervention in the Spanish civil war and with the defeatism of much of the French bourgeoisie and officer class in 1940, Quisling in Norway, and so on.

The result was that the defeatist position adopted in 1938 by the founding congress of the Trotskyist Fourth International lacked political purchase. Mass support, to the extent that it moved to the left against the bourgeois governments, moved to the communists who - after 1941 - unequivocally favoured the defeat of the Axis. It did not move in the direction of the defeatist, or at best equivocal, Trotskyists. The Trotskyists were split by the war - at least in Britain, France, and China, and probably elsewhere - between defeatists and advocates of the 'proletarian military policy', who argued that the working class needed to take over the conduct of the war in order to defend its own interests.⁶⁷

In fact, if we look back on 1914-18 itself, it should be apparent from what I said in discussing the outbreak of the war (above) that it was the *specific military-political conditions* of 1914-18 which allowed Lenin's thesis to obtain the sort of political purchase it did. If the war had been fought on German soil, as Engels anticipated in 1891, a German revolutionary-defencist policy would have been vindicated. If it had been a short war, the issue would have been brushed aside.

It was the enormity of 1914-18, and in particular the stalemated fronts, which powered both the defeatist thesis and willingness to split the International.

In other words, the judgment that defeatism is the right approach to inter-imperialist wars is a *concrete* judgment about the particular war. But there are strategic principles which lie behind it.

Terminal phase

Half the justification for defeatism was Lenin's belief that imperialism was the highest stage of capitalism and hence that 1914-18 showed that revolution was immediately on the agenda. This would mean that the strategy of patience was wholly superseded. This idea was expressed in several documents of the first three congresses of the Comintern, which assert that the major capitalist countries are on the verge of civil war.

This judgment of the *international* situation is, in fact, the hidden secret of the defeatist line for the world inter-imperialist war. In such a war, it is an almost impracticable line for the workers' party of any *single* belligerent country. But if the workers' parties of *all* the belligerent countries agitate and organise against the war in the ranks of the armed forces, the *possibility* exists of fraternisation between the ranks of the contending armies, leading to the soldiers turning their arms first on their officers and then on their political-economic masters.

This is the meaning of Lenin's argument in his polemic against Trotsky that it is essential to his policy "that co-ordination and mutual aid are possible between revolutionary movements in *all* the belligerent countries".⁶⁸ Such a line *assumes that the mass workers' International exists and that its national sections can be made to follow a common defeatist line.*

The idea that the class struggle was moving internationally into civil war not only supported the position of 'turning the imperialist war into the civil war'. It also underpinned Lenin's and his Russian co-thinkers' willingness to gamble on the seizure of power by a workers' party in a peasant-majority country. It justified the extremely sharp split line in relation to the right and centre tendencies in the

international socialist movement. And it supported the explicit conception of a more or less militarised workers' party adopted in 1920-21.

I argued in my 2004 series on imperialism that this idea mistook the crisis of *British world hegemony* for a terminal-phase crisis of capitalism. The Comintern was, in fact, already retreating from its full implications by mid-1921. But the Comintern leaders clung to it - and Trotsky clung to it to his death. They did so because, for the Russian leaders, it was their only hope of salvation. If the revolution in western Europe, or that of the 'peoples of the east' against colonialism, did not come to their aid, they had betrayed the hope of the socialist revolution as thoroughly as the right wing of the socialists by their actions in 1918-21. (Cheka, suppression of political opposition, suspension of soviet elections, strike-breaking, Kronstadt and their theorisation of one-party rule of the militarised party as a necessary aspect of the dictatorship of the proletariat).

To say this, however, is still not to imply that the defeatist strategic line was wrong. It was (at least partially) right because it made a *true* judgment about the state.

State, war and revolution

It is not the capitalist *class* which is the central obstacle to the emancipation of the working class, but the capitalist *state and international state system*.

We have already seen this point in chapter one (Marx and Engels' critiques of Gotha emphasised the Lassalleans' illusions in the German empire), chapter two (the policy of government coalitions requires the socialists to manage the state as a competing firm in the world market, and therefore to attack the working class; the mass strike or revolutionary crisis immediately poses the question of government and the form of authority) and chapter three (the Kautskyian centre downgraded the question of state form and ended by bringing state-bureaucratism and nationalism into the workers' movement).

A state is, at the end of the day, an organised *armed force*. The states of particular classes are tied to those classes by the forms in

which they are organised. For the working class to take power, therefore, the existing capitalist (or pre-capitalist) state has to be ‘smashed up’. And at the end of the day, this means that the coherence of the existing *armed forces* has to be destroyed.

Lenin’s judgment, expressed in defeatism, was that the war, *because* it was unjust and predatory, and *because* it showed imperialist capitalism coming up against its historical limits, offered the workers’ party both the need and the possibility to destroy the coherence of the existing armed forces through anti-war agitation - and thereby to take power.

The *need* was there because the war in itself involved the mass blood-sacrifice of workers. It was also there because any war in which serious forces are engaged and in which the international standing of the belligerent state is at issue reshapes politics around itself. The class struggle therefore necessarily takes the form of the struggle against the war (this is not true of all wars: colonial counterinsurgency operations, etc, reshape the politics of the colonial country but do not necessarily reshape those of the imperialist country).

The *possibility* was there because the war was unjust and predatory in character, and therefore tended to lose political legitimacy as it went on.

Underlying the defeatist line, then, is a strategic understanding that in order to take power the working class needs to overthrow the ruling class’s state: that is, to break up the coherence of this state as an organisation of armed force. This strategic understanding is in no sense dependent on the “actuality of the revolution” (Lukács).

Preparing for defeatism

The war *immediately* posed the question of state power and the coherence of the armed forces, as (in a different way) an internally driven revolutionary crisis or mass strike wave does. But the advocates of the ‘strategy of patience’ *could have* prepared the workers’ movement and the society as a whole for the fact that this question would in future be posed. They chose not to.

In his 1891 critique of the Erfurt programme, Engels wrote that

“If one thing is certain it is that our party and the working class can only come to power under the form of a democratic republic. This is even the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the Great French Revolution has already shown.”⁶⁹

A democratic republican military policy implies fighting for universal military training, a popular militia and the right to keep and bear arms. It also implies that within any standing military force which may be necessary, the ranks should have freedom of political speech and the right to organise in political parties and trade unions.

It further implies taking seriously the expression ‘defence’ which appears in ideological form in the ‘ministry of defence’. This means consistent opposition in principle to colonial wars and overseas interventions, including ‘peacekeeping’ activities, which are invariably founded on lies and serve concealed imperialist interests.

If we take every opportunity to spread the ideas of a democratic republican military policy, by doing so we arm the working class movement for the conditions in which defeatism becomes a real necessity. To the extent that we win individual reforms in this direction, we will in practice undermine the ability of the armed forces to be used in defence of the capitalist class, both against the colonies and semicolonies, and also against a proletarian majority.

These ideas are neither an innovation from Marxist principles, nor a ‘republican shibboleth’. They are a version of the policy Engels urged on the SPD in 1892-9 in his series of articles *Can Europe disarm?*⁷⁰ Their absence from the political arsenal of the British left is the product of a timid pacifism which is covered by super-revolutionary phrases about rejecting ‘reforming the bourgeois state.’

Defeatism and the Trotskyists

The Trotskyists have made of defeatism something different: not a practical strategic choice for the working class’s struggle for power, but a purity test. Every war becomes, like 1914-18, a test of the revolutionary moral fibre of organisations; positions considered false on international conflicts are ‘proof’ of succumbing to the pressure of the bourgeoisie.

It has to be said that this Trotskyist use of war policy as a purity

test does originate in the Comintern and Lenin's policy of defeatism. But it originates not in defeatism itself, but in a combination of revolutionary-*defencism* with the arguments in 1914-18 and immediately after for the split from the right and centre (to be discussed in the next chapter).

When Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, Trotsky argued that the workers' movement should favour the victory of the Ethiopians led by the emperor Haile Selassie.⁷¹ In the Japanese invasion of China, Trotsky argued in 1937 for the Chinese workers' organisations to pursue a defencist policy: "the duty of all the workers' organisations of China was to participate actively and in the front lines of the present war against Japan"⁷² In 1938 Trotsky argued that in the (highly unlikely) event of a military conflict between Britain and the Vargas dictatorship in Brazil, the working class should "be on the side of 'fascist' Brazil against "democratic" Great Britain. Why? Because in the conflict between them it will not be a question of democracy or fascism. If Britain should be victorious, she will put another fascist in Rio de Janeiro and will place double chains on Brazil. If Brazil on the contrary should be victorious, it will give a mighty impulse to national and democratic consciousness of the country and will lead to the overthrow of the Vargas dictatorship."⁷³

The *defencist* argument, it should be clear from both the Chinese case and the hypothesis of a Britain-Brazil war, is an argument about the road of the working class to power in a colonial or semi-colonial country under attack from an imperialist power. It is a variant of the line of the 'anti-imperialist front'. I have argued against this line in my 2004 series on imperialism.⁷⁴

The false character of Trotsky's 1937 line for China is a particularly clear instance. The Kuomintang regime was a government in form, which in practice presided over warlordism: it was not an effective coherent state. In this context, in order to defeat the Japanese invasion, what was needed was to *create a state, alternative to* the KMT pseudo-state: the policy followed by the Maoists, who fought on two fronts *both* against the Japanese *and* against the KMT, and as a result in 1948 were able to take power. To "participate actively and in the front lines" of the war, as Trotsky argued, would

not open the road to the masses but merely identify the communists (in this case, the Trotskyists) with the failing KMT regime.

In some cases it is clear that revolutionary defencism would be the appropriate stance of communists in the colonial country. In others - like in China in the 1930s and Iraq today - the right approach of communists would be to create a 'third military camp'. In yet others - like the Argentinian invasion of the Falklands/ Malvinas in 1982 and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 - the right response is a kind of revolutionary defeatism, ie, to denounce the irresponsible adventurism of the invasion.

In his 1940 proposals of the "proletarian military policy" in the wake of the fall of France, Trotsky was to return to revolutionary defencism: "the capitalists and their state will sell you out to the Nazis, you need to arm yourselves" (and, by implication, soldiers need to take action against defeatist officers, and so on).⁷⁵ This is in substance the same as Engels' 'defencist' line of 1891. But this was not Trotsky's line for the colonial countries in the passages quoted above. On the contrary, these passages show a merely moralising defencism which demanded that the working class 'supported' the weaker side. This is perhaps understandable in the Ethiopian case, given the marginality of the proletariat in Ethiopia in 1935. For China it was Stalin's line, which Mao and his cothinkers refused to follow. It would have been complete nonsense in the unlikely event of a British attack on Brazil.

Leaving these defects aside, a critical point is that defencism in the colonial countries is a policy *for communists in the colonial countries*. Before 1935 Ethiopia was a semi-colony in the British sphere of influence. Ethiopian-defencism by communists *in Britain* would therefore have amounted merely to demanding a more aggressive defence of *British imperial* interests against Italy - just as Serbian-defencism in 1914 amounted to defence of British and French imperial interests. Brazilian-defencism by communists in the United States in the highly implausible circumstance of a British attack on Brazil in 1938 would similarly have amounted to defence of *US imperial* interests. 'Iraqi-defencism' in Germany and France in 2002-03 would similarly amount to defence of German and French commercial interests in their companies' contracts with the Ba'athist

regime.

Defeatism in the imperial countries, on the other hand, no more needs to imply defencism of the other side than, for example, defeatism for Russian workers in 1914-18 meant victory to the Kaiser (for the reasons given above). Communists in the imperialist country or countries involved should be *defeatist*, that is, fight against the war, including by agitation as far as possible in the armed forces: that is, in the same way that Lenin urged defeatism in relation to the 1914-18 war. In relation to what should happen on the 'other side', their primary approach should be one of solidarity with the workers' movement and communists in the 'target' country.

Trotsky's moralising version of colonial-country defencism was then overlaid by 'purifying split' arguments, in Trotsky's last political legacy to the Trotskyists. This was the 1939-40 split in the US Socialist Workers' Party on the question whether socialists should favour the victory of the USSR in its invasions of Finland, Poland and the Baltic states in the wake of the Hitler-Stalin pact.⁷⁶ In his polemics in the lead-up to this split, Trotsky combined substantive arguments for Soviet-defencism (siding with the USSR in war whatever the merits of the Soviet regime's particular actions) with arguments for a 'purifying' split of the type used by Lenin and Zinoviev in 1914-16 and in the Comintern leadership's arguments for a split with the Kautskyites.

Now, *if* it were true - as Trotsky claimed - that the USSR was a kind of workers' organisation, a 'trade union that had seized power', and a strategic gain for the working class in spite of the bad leadership of the Stalinists, then defencism would be broadly justified and it would be equally justified to call its opponents scabs. Soviet-defencism would also clearly be a task of the working class *in every country*, whether imperialist or colonial and whether at war with the USSR or not.

Even so it would not be *completely* justified. For example, I do not think that any Trotskyist group supported the 1974 Ulster Workers' Council general strike against the Sunningdale agreement. Nor, on a smaller scale, have Marxist socialists ever given support to strikes which demand the exclusion of ethnic or religious minorities from the workplace (which have occasionally happened). In the case

of capitalist attacks on the USSR, like the intervention in 1918-21 or like 1941, Soviet-defencism would be plainly justified. Where the Stalinist regime used military force against a workers' revolutionary movement, as in NKVD operations in Spain, Soviet-defencism would be obviously wrong.

The Soviet invasions of Finland, Poland and the Baltic states did not fall obviously into either case, so it would be necessary to ask whether *in the concrete* Soviet victory would strengthen or weaken the position of the working class as a global class. The Soviet invasions of Finland, Poland and the Baltic states, *in alliance with the Nazi regime*, would probably not qualify. It is perfectly clear that the Hitler-Stalin Pact *enabled* the imposition of fascism (through German conquest) in western continental Europe and the Balkans: a large price for the international workers' movement to be expected to pay for a small *glacis* west of the USSR (and one which proved in 1941 to be illusory). The nearest analogy in trade union affairs would be an event of a type which has from time to time happened: one craft union makes a deal with the employer which includes de-recognition of other unions and thus allows *one section* of the workforce to make gains at the expense of other sections.

In reality (as I argued in the introduction) Trotsky's assessment was wrong: given that there was no prospect of the working class taking power back from the bureaucracy, the Stalinist Soviet regime could *not* be considered as a strategic gain for the working class, or in the same light as a trade union. Other things apart,⁷⁷ this assessment would imply that the USSR under Stalin should be approached as a nationalist-bonapartist regime based on the petty proprietors, ie like the Brazilian Vargas regime or, in modern times, the Iraqi Ba'athist regime, but with rhetoric much further left. This would imply a revolutionary-defencist policy *in some circumstances* (like the 1941 German invasion). It would not imply such a policy in the case of an agreement with a neighbouring imperialist power (Germany) to carve up the small states in the locality (Finland, Poland and the Baltic states).

Trotsky's position in 1939-40 was thus substantially wrong *irrespective of the arguments about the class character of the*

Soviet state. On top of this error came the argument that the opposition represented a ‘petty-bourgeois opposition’ and one which was caving in to the pressure of US imperialism. The result was a hard organisational split aimed to ‘purify’ the SWP of this ‘petty-bourgeois influence’ and accompanied by a conference resolution giving formal purging powers to the SWP party apparatus. But the brevity of the faction-fight meant that the split took place on the basis of extremely muddled positions.

As we will see in the next chapter, ‘purifying’ splits do not achieve their object (to protect the pure revolutionaries from contamination). The 1940 split in the SWP and Fourth International is a textbook example. After the fall of France, Trotsky radically diluted his ‘principle’ of dual-defeatism in the inter-imperialist war in favour of the ‘proletarian military policy’. By 1948 the ‘orthodox’ majority were demanding the withdrawal of Soviet troops from eastern Europe, the exact opposite of Trotsky’s line in 1939.⁷⁸

The muddle of 1937-40 has become a part of Trotskyist orthodoxy. That is, Trotskyists in the imperialist countries must be ‘defeatist’ in colonial wars in the peculiar sense of being ‘defencist’ in relation to the colonial country or movement. Trotskyists in the colonial countries must be ‘defencist’ in the same sense. To do otherwise is said to be to be ‘pro-imperialist’ or ‘social-chauvinist’, thus justifying a hard split to purify the party. The ‘left’ Trotskyist groups, especially those influenced by the US Spartacist League, have been most systematic in pursuing this policy. But it has remained part of the polemical arsenal of the ‘softer’ Trotskyist groups whenever differences arise on war questions.

The Spartacist League and sub-Sparts might be said to have reduced this idea to absurdity when they argued that Afghan communists should join with the Taliban (who would immediately shoot them) to fight US imperialism: a policy of ‘revolutionary suicide’ which might have been borrowed from Monty Python’s ‘Judean People’s Front crack suicide squad’.

But the absurdity crown must surely belong to the British SWP comrades, who claim their revolutionary credentials by calling for “victory to the Iraqi resistance”. This same SWP has for the last 20

years resolutely *opposed* in the name of ‘broad unity’ any political agitation either for a democratic republican military policy, or for organised workers’ self-defence. Today its ‘revolutionary defeatist’, supposedly anti-imperialist, alliance with political islam involves sacrificing fundamentals of democratic, let alone socialist, policy.

5

Communist strategy and the party form

In chapter four we saw that ‘defeatism’ was intimately linked to Lenin’s struggle, from 1914 on, to force a split in the Second International. Lenin argued for a clear split not only with the “social-chauvinists” of the right and centre who had actually supported their own belligerent governments, but also with the “social-pacifists” of the centre.

As we have seen, Lenin’s split policy was not accepted by the majority of his co-thinkers - let alone the wider anti-war left in the workers’ movement - until after October 1917. It reached its decisive moment in the 1920 adoption by the Comintern of the ‘Twenty-one conditions’, which were designed to force the split with the centre.

It would be tedious to list the processes of split since then which have left us with - at least! - 57 varieties of left group in Britain, leave aside the international variations.

Sectarian?

The Eurocommunist Fernando Claudin in his *From Comintern to Cominform* (1975) argued that the split in the Second International was “a model of sectarianism and bureaucratic method”, to which the modern splintered working class movement can be traced back. Claudin’s argument has been widely adopted. Many liberal and social democratic critics of communism and some leftists would place the source further back - at the 1903 split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks; they rely on Luxemburg’s and Trotsky’s contemporary critiques of Lenin.⁷⁹ The anarchists would take it a stage further: the 1871 split in the First International, they would say, showed Marx’s

sectarianism and ‘authoritarian methods’ at work.

The seductive quality of these arguments consists in two facts. First, 1871, 1903 and the split consummated in 1921 *have* commonly been used as ‘arguments’ by bureaucratic and sectarian splitters. Second, in all three cases the arguments are fundamentally false but contain a partial truth.

In 1871 a split which was really about political strategy was confusingly presented as a split about Bakunin’s secret dictatorial conspiracy; but Bakunin’s secret dictatorial conspiracy was real.⁸⁰ Bakunin’s hypocrisy (and his very confused ideas) obscure the fact that he and his followers identified a real problem about the forms of authority in the workers’ movement.

Luxemburg’s and Trotsky’s critiques of Lenin would have been perfectly legitimate *if* the 1903 split in the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party had been about implementing a top-down, conspiratorial party model, but (as Lenin pointed out in his 1904 response to Luxemburg) it was not.⁸¹ However, against the *interpretation placed on 1903* in Zinoviev’s *History of the Bolshevik Party* and, as a result, by James P Cannon and by the later ‘orthodox Trotskyists’ and the Maoists, Luxemburg’s and Trotsky’s critiques had considerable validity.

The split in the Second International was justified, but the reasoning given for it at the time was at least partly unsound, and this unsound reasoning has indeed promoted the division of the left into micro-groups.

Splitting as a strategy

Lenin’s original argument for a split with the social-chauvinist leaders was quite simply that they had betrayed the decisions of the International and the interests of the working class and were scabs. The explanation he gave was that “This collapse has been mainly caused by the actual prevalence in it of petty bourgeois opportunism, the bourgeois nature and the danger of which have long been indicated by the finest representatives of the revolutionary proletariat of all countries.” Further, “The so-called centre of the German and other social democratic parties has in actual fact faint-heartedly capitulated

to the opportunists. It must be the task of the future International resolutely and irrevocably to rid itself of this bourgeois trend in socialism.”⁸²

The Lenin-Zinoviev 1915 pamphlet *Socialism and war* goes on to argue for the split on a class basis - class unity and class independence requires separation from the right:

“In the past epoch, before the war, although opportunism was often regarded as a ‘deviationist’, ‘extremist’ part of the Social Democratic Party, it was nevertheless regarded as a legitimate part. The war has shown that this cannot be so in future. Opportunism has ‘matured’, is now playing to the full its role as emissary of the bourgeois in the working class movement. Unity with the opportunists has become sheer hypocrisy, an example of which we see in the German Social Democratic Party. On all important occasions (for example, the voting on August 4), the opportunists come forward with an ultimatum, which they carry out with the aid of their numerous connections with the bourgeoisie, of their majority on the executives of the trade unions, etc. *Unity* with the opportunists *actually* means today subordinating the working class to ‘its’ national bourgeoisie, alliance with it for the purpose of oppressing other nations and of fighting for great-power privileges; it means *splitting* the revolutionary proletariat in all countries.

“Hard as the struggle may be, in individual cases, against the opportunists who predominate in many organisations, peculiar as the process of purging the workers’ parties of opportunists may be in individual countries, this process is inevitable and fruitful. Reformist socialism is dying; regenerated socialism ‘will be revolutionary, uncompromising and insurrectionary’, to use the apt expression of the French socialist, Paul Golay.”⁸³

In *Socialism and war*, and more fully in *Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism*, the class argument is extended to connect opportunism to imperialism and the ability to ‘buy off’ a section of the working class: “Opportunism and social-chauvinism have the same economic basis: the interests of a tiny stratum of privileged workers and of the petty bourgeoisie who are defending their privileged position, their ‘right’ to crumbs of the profits ‘their’

national bourgeoisie obtain from robbing other nations, from the advantages of their position as the ruling nation, etc.”⁸⁴

This argument seeks a strategic split in two senses. On the one hand, the strategy of the regenerated movement is to be ‘revolutionary’ and not ‘reformist’. On the other, it is a strategic break from the Second International’s strategy of unity, discussed in chapter one. It is, indeed, the exact opposite. By splitting from the right, the left, which represents the working class, is to *purge the workers’ parties of opportunists*, to purify itself and ‘regenerate’ socialism as ‘revolutionary’. Splitting becomes *in itself* a strategy to purify the movement.

False...

These arguments are fundamentally false but contain true elements.

To begin at the theoretical level, the theory of the imperialist labour aristocracy is false. In the first place, workers’ level of class consciousness does not map inversely onto their relative material advantages. To take a single British example out of many possible ones, in the late 19th century skilled miners and railway workers were on the right wing of the movement; by the early 20th they were on its left. The theory of the imperialist labour aristocracy is also completely impotent to explain reformism and the labour bureaucracy in the colonial and semi-colonial countries, which has been an all too obvious problem since the 1930s. The theory therefore wholly lacks predictive power.

Bukharin in *Imperialism and world economy* has a better understanding: that is, that the relative advantages of a nation-state in the world hierarchy will allow *the state* to gain the loyalty of at least a large section of its working class. But this understanding can be extended to the case of colonies and semi-colonies. Left nationalism, which is the main equivalent in the colonial world of “social-chauvinism”, seeks to improve the position of the poor (including the working class) by improving the relative standing of *its* nation-state in the world hierarchy; and there can be relative advantages in this hierarchy not only, for example, between Britain and Argentina, but also between Britain and France, or between Brazil

and Argentina.

Once this point is grasped, it is clear that the strategy of split will *not* purify the workers' movement, and that the idea that the workers' movement can be purified from 'reformism'/'social-chauvinism' by separation of the 'revolutionaries'/'internationalists' is illusory. Working class support for one's own capitalist nation-state is produced by dynamics inherent in the capitalist nation-state system and world market, and there is no grouping within the working class which is presumptively free of it.

The Bolsheviks, in fact, themselves demonstrated in 1917 the falsity of the policy of purifying the movement through splits. Firstly, when Lenin returned to Russia, the All-Russia Central Committee, including Kamenev and Stalin, was engaged in discussing with the Mensheviks unity on the basis of critical support for the Provisional government. Secondly, in October, two central Bolshevik leaders, Zinoviev and Kamenev, broke ranks to denounce the planned insurrection in the bourgeois press. The Bolsheviks' *separation from* the Mensheviks had proved to be no guarantee against reformism.

The need for 'purging' the movement of opportunists and "accidental elements" was to be a central demand of the 'Twenty-one conditions'. The periodic purge was also to be one of the central weapons the Bolshevik leadership promoted against corruption and bureaucratic degeneration once the party had taken power. In this character it was - to put it mildly - wholly ineffective. Individual bureaucrats and corrupt elements might be purged, but the overall effect of the purges was to increase the power of the party bureaucracy as such over the rank and file, and therefore *reduce* and, indeed, rapidly eliminate the ability of the proletariat as a class to fight for its class interests through the Communist Party.

So-called 'Leninist' sectarians believe that splitting organisationally from the right and repeated purges will make a pure revolutionary organisation. The political collapse of such sectarians into the most abject opportunism has been a repeated feature of the history of Trotskyism and Maoism. The process is going on before our eyes in the British SWP.

... and partly true

Lenin's and Zinoviev's arguments for a split in *Socialism and war* nonetheless contain a side comment which goes to the heart of the matter, quoted above: "On all important occasions (for example, the voting on August 4), the opportunists come forward with an ultimatum, which they carry out with the aid of their numerous connections with the bourgeoisie, of their majority on the executives of the trade unions, etc."

The loyalty of the right wing of the movement to the capitalist state is rewarded with state - and capitalist - intervention on the side of the right in the debates and decision-making of the workers' movement. In World War I this took the form of the open use of state censorship against critics of the war. More usually, it takes more subtle forms: financial support, media attention and disinformation operations of the intelligence apparatus, provocations, etc against the left (the smear campaign against George Galloway is a recent example, albeit one to which Galloway's political errors made him particularly vulnerable).

As a result, the right is characterised by persistent use of ultimatums, splits and party, union, etc bureaucratic censorship against the left. In the German SPD this had begun well before the war, with the misuse of Engels' 1895 preface to *The civil war in France*, and the suppression of the first edition of Kautsky's *The road to power*.⁸⁵ In more recent times, the British Social Democratic Party's 1981 split from Labour was only the most extreme example of a routine practice of ultimatums, sabotage, etc, of the Labour and trade union right.

The right *represents itself* as the democratic representative of more backward elements of the working class - ordinary working class monarchists, for example - so that it *claims* that, even when it is in a minority in the movement, it is nonetheless entitled to a majority in its leadership or to control of what the movement says. The same argument can be found in Neil Kinnock's claims to represent the voiceless masses against the left in the 1980s Labour Party and John Rees's similar claims against the CPGB at the Respect founding conference. They are the continuation of the practice of the right wing in the German SPD.

The right is linked to the state and willing to use ultimatums,

ensorship and splits to prevent the party standing in open opposition to that state. It insists that the only possible unity is if it has a veto on what is said and done. The unity of the workers' movement *on the right's terms* is necessarily subordination of the interests of the working class to those of the state.

Marxists, who wish to oppose the present state rather than to manage it loyally, can then only be in *partial* unity with the loyalist wing of the workers' movement. We can bloc with them on particular issues. We can and will take membership in parties and organisations they control - and violate their constitutional rules and discipline - in order to fight their politics. But we have to organise ourselves *independently* of them. That means that we need our own press, finances, leadership committees, conferences, branches and other organisations.

It does not matter whether these are formally within parties which the right controls, formally outside them, or part inside and part outside. This is tactics. The problem is not to purify the movement, which is illusory, but to fight the politics of class collaborationism.

In the concrete conditions of 1914-21, fighting class collaborationism did indeed mean an organisational split with most of the centre as well as with the right. After the split, the centre promptly proved the point. Parts of the centre regrouped in what the communists satirically called the 'Two and a Half International'; by 1923 this had reunified with the Second International. It proved to be unable to fight the right in the International, and, indeed, collapsed into its politics. Fetishising unity at all costs had proved - as Marx and Engels warned in 1875 - to negate the ability to fight for working class political independence.

A party of a new type

The course of events in 1917-21 overlaid upon the original ground for a split (purifying the class movement) a new ground: the idea of a party of a new type - that is, a party in the image of the Bolsheviks. This idea was codified in the 1920 Second Congress 'Theses on the role of the Communist Party in the proletarian revolution' and in the 1921 Third Congress theses, 'The organisational structure of the

communist parties, the methods and content of their work'.⁸⁶

There are three critical elements in the new organisational concept. The first is that the party is to be a party of the 'vanguard': the advanced minority of the working class. It is not to lay claim to being directly the party of the mass of the working class (unlike, for example, the British Labour Party). The second, related, point is that it is to be an *activist* party, a party which organises the political work of its members. The 1921 theses contain, in this respect, some valuable pragmatic advice about the practical means of organising and building a party.

The third is that it is to be 'strictly centralised'. There is to be no question of broad autonomy of branches, fractions, etc; everything is to be under the control of the central committee. Indeed, the 1921 theses incorporate (inexplicitly) the ban on factions recently adopted by the Russian Communist Party (thesis 6: "incompatible with the principles of democratic centralism adopted by the Communist International are antagonisms or power struggles within the party"). They give individual delegates of the central committee the right to veto local decisions (thesis 48: "The representatives and delegates of the central leadership are entitled to attend all meetings and sessions with a consultative voice *and the right of veto*").

There is no doubt that these were intended to be strategic choices. They are grounded on the one hand by the positive balance sheet of the Russian Bolshevik Party, which by 1920-21 was clearly winning the civil war, On the other hand by the defeats suffered by the left in the German revolution of 1918-19, by the Hungarian revolution of 1919, and by the Italian revolutionary movement of autumn 1920, which the Comintern leadership attributed to the lack of a 'party of a Bolshevik type'.

The 'new party concept' is intensely contradictory. On the one hand, it is a genuine advance in the theorisation of actual membership-based political parties. Membership-based political parties, as opposed to loose coalition political trends, were an innovation of the later 19th century, and when Marx and Engels said that "the communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other parties of the working class" (*Communist manifesto*) and made similar statements about

“parties” it was this sort of broad unorganised trend that they meant. The Second International had built membership-based parties, but had not theorised what they were. In this aspect ‘anti-Leninism’ is characterised by simple political unrealism and ends in practice either in total inability to organise, or in reproducing the worst aspects of so-called ‘Leninism’.

On the other hand, it is also a theorisation of what the Bolsheviks had done to their party in 1918-21, both in militarising it and in setting it up as a minority dictatorship, a state authority *against* the working class. In this aspect the ‘new party concept’ or, as it came to be called after Lenin’s death, ‘Leninism’, was a theory of the dictatorship of the bureaucracy, and one which was to animate endless bureaucratic sects.

This contradiction can be seen present in each of the three strands of the new party concept: the vanguard party, the party of activists and strict centralism.

The vanguard party

That a party is *only part* of the society is logically necessary. That the organised membership of a political party, however large, is a minority, is a simple fact about political parties in capitalist society - even very large ones like the Labour Party, etc. That in the case of a workers’ party this minority is in some sense the ‘vanguard’ is an idea which cannot be abandoned without abandoning the idea that the party should promote its distinct political programme. If we are not ‘more advanced’ in the sense of having a better understanding of the strategic line of march than non-members, then our organising is a waste of time and money and is a fraud; and this is as true of the Labour Party, etc as it is of left groups.

If the job of a party is to represent the voiceless masses rather than to promote a distinct set of political ideas, it collapses into an organ of the state without political ideas: the character of the major capitalist parties in the two-party systems of much of the modern political world. The result is that the unorganised masses are denied the genuine political choices which they *could* make when they vote, etc. This result is inherently anti-democratic.

There is a danger however that this ‘vanguard party’ reasoning can be taken to rule out the possibility that the party is wrong and non-party elements right. In this case the claim that the party is the advanced party becomes in principle untestable. Moreover, it logically follows that the leadership is the ‘advanced part’ of the party and as such is in principle right against the ‘backward elements’ of the ranks. Since the possibility that the ‘backward elements’ are right is ruled out, the claim that the leaders are ‘more advanced’ is untestable, and is a matter of pure faith.

The necessary consequence is that ‘more advanced leading cadre’ are, in effect, justified by faith alone, as with the Calvinist Elect. Like the dodgy end of the Calvinist ‘elect’, nothing is forbidden to them: among the Trotskyist organisations the ‘vanguard role’ has been used to justify violence in the workers’ movement (Cannon, the Lambertists, the Healyites, the Loraites, the SWP), taking money from questionable sources (the Lambertistes, the Healyites), and sexual exploitation of female members (the Healyites, the Spartacists). These are merely pale shadows of the personal corruption and violence of the Stalinist bureaucracies.

The party of activists

The idea of the party of activists is in itself no more than a recognition that political activity is work - and that, like other forms of work, it benefits from (a) commitment and (b) an organised division of labour. It also has a ‘civic republican’ aspect to it. That is, it is counterposed to the liberal and market political-science view of parties, which sees party leaderships as firms offering political brands to the atomised voter-consumer or member-consumer. In contrast, in the ‘party of activists’, the party member is to be an active citizen of his or her party, through active involvement in a branch, fraction or other party body which does its own collective work as part of the party, and the passive consumer-member is not to have a vote.

Though the Comintern texts address directly only the shortcomings of the social democracy, in this aspect they have grasped a fundamental feature of the capitalist political order in parliamentary regimes: ie, that what is given with one hand through

universal suffrage is taken away with another through the constitution of the party system. (It is also taken away by monarchism/presidentialism, judicial review, militarised police, mercenary armies, etc; but these are long stops relative to the *immediate* role of the capitalist party system in disenfranchising the masses).

The other, negative, side of the ‘party of activists’ idea is given by its combination with the ‘actuality of the revolution’: the idea that the trouble with the Second International was its ‘passive propagandism’, and that the tasks of the workers’ movement have gone beyond propaganda, etc, to agitation intended to lead to the immediate struggle for power. Taken together with the idea of a developed division of labour, this idea leads all too easily into the creation of a division of labour between the ‘grunts’ at the base, who are to run round like blue-arsed flies from one agitational initiative to the next, and the thinkers in the leadership. Self-education of the militants at the base and long-term propaganda work for ideas that are not currently agitational is damned as ‘propagandism’.

The fetishism of the ‘actuality of the revolution’ and short-term agitation as opposed to ‘propagandism’ can also have a negative effect on the necessarily patient, and long-term, *organising* work of communist involvement in building trade unions, cooperatives, and so on. Strikes and similar mass struggles may produce a burst of activity of the organisation as a whole; but outside these times, communist militants in trade unions and so on are ‘left to get on with it’. The usual result is that they become *merely* trade unionists (etc) who happen to hold party cards.

The paradoxical effect is to *reinstate* the liberal-market bourgeois party form. The members, though active, are active in *doing what the leaders tell them*, and cease to be really active citizens of their party. The leaders become a firm selling a brand: Socialist Workers Party, Workers Power, Alliance for Workers’ Liberty. Dissent - especially dissent about fundamentals - becomes the enemy of ‘activism’ and the ‘activists’ themselves resent the dissenters who are ‘stopping them getting on with the job’. In this framework, serious disagreement inevitably leads to a split.

Centralism

Centralism has two senses. The first is the absence of *legal* constitutional rights of the state's or organisation's components (cantons, provinces, branches, etc) to sovereignty in 'their patch'. I stress *legal* constitutional rights, first because in their absence the centre may still not *practically* be able to enforce its will in the localities - see, for example, the SWP's difficulty in turning its local branches round Respect.

Second, because in the absence of legal constitutional rights of the components we do not have federalism. England before the rise of mass suffrage was deeply *politically* committed to the autonomy of local government, but that did not make this country federal. Having federalism thus implies having a constitutional court to decide whether the centre has invaded the components' rights. Federalism is, in other words, a form of dictatorship of the lawyers. That is why the US capitalist class at the time of the creation of the US constitution preferred federalism to democratic republicanism. In this sense, the Comintern's centralism was right.

Federalism even in the 'dictatorship of the lawyers' sense may, of course, be a step forward in relation to what actually exists. Thus, for example, Marx and Engels argued that a federation of the British isles would be preferable to the existing UK unionism.⁸⁷

The second sense of centralism is the sense Engels points to in his critique of the Erfurt programme. He denounces the French form of the state as "the empire established in 1799 without the emperor": the existence of a centralised, hierarchical, bureaucratic apparatus in which local officials are appointed from and responsible to the centre, rather than locally elected.⁸⁸ It was this Bonapartist sort of centralism which the Bolsheviks created in their party in 1918-21 and exported in the 1921 theses.

The Bolsheviks in 1921 *represented* this centralism as the historic character of their faction-party since 1903. This representation was 'codified' in Zinoviev's 1924 *History of the Bolshevik Party*, but it was an unambiguous falsification of their history. Trotsky wrote in 1931 that "Whoever is acquainted with the history of the Bolshevik Party knows what a broad autonomy the local organisations always

enjoyed: they issued their own papers, in which they openly and sharply, whenever they found it necessary, criticised the actions of the central committee. Had the central committee, in the case of principled differences, attempted to disperse the local organisations ... before the party had had an opportunity to express itself - such a central committee would have made itself impossible.”⁸⁹ This view has been confirmed by detailed modern historical research into Bolshevik practice down to 1918.⁹⁰

It is reasonably clear why the Bolsheviks did it. They *thought* it was a necessity of civil war. That was also why they exported it: the parties of the Comintern needed to be parties fit for civil war. In fact, the idea that civil war implies Bonapartist centralism can readily be falsified by the experiences of the English civil war, the French revolutionary war before 1799, and the American revolution and civil war.

In reality, it was required in Russia by the combination of the failure of the German workers’ movement to come to the aid of the Russian revolution, and the Bolshevik adoption of the Narodniks’ distributivist land programme. This left the Bolsheviks effectively isolated in a peasant-dominated country. The only way to resist the Whites was to base themselves on the peasants, which they duly did.

Representing the peasants forced them to create the sort of state that peasant revolutionary movements normally tend to create, which is an absolutist one. The re-creation of new Chinese dynasties after peasant revolts; the peasants’ support for late feudal absolutism in 17th century Sweden, France, etc; and French Bonapartism itself, are all examples. The Bolsheviks built up a Bonapartist state round the party: and to do so, they had to change the *party* into “the empire without the emperor”.

It is unsurprising to find that the fate of parties of this type is to be *unable* to be a political instrument of the working class. In peasant-dominated countries, they can take power, but create only a road back to capitalism by a long and bloody detour: Russia itself, Yugoslavia, China, Albania, Vietnam ... In fully capitalist countries, they can have one of three fates.

- They can evolve back into *Kautskyan* parties - the clearest cases

are the French and Italian Communist Parties. Such parties officially prohibit factions, but have them *de facto*, and are officially Bonapartist-centralist, but in practice allow a lot of leeway to the branches and factions. They can actually be useful for the workers' movement and the development of class consciousness even if they have coalitionist politics which they cannot carry into practice (all of them between the 1950s and the 1970s) and even if they are small (like the old CPGB).

- They can turn into small bureaucratic-centralist sects (most of the Trotskyist and Maoist groups and some 'official communist' ones).
- Or they can collapse altogether.

Adopting and exporting Bonapartist centralism was just plain wrong. When it was completed by the 1921 ban on factions, it left no legal means by which the working class could get its party back: as became apparent in the fate of the oppositions of the 1920s. It tended to emphasise the negative rather than the positive sides of the 'vanguard party' and the 'party of activists'.

What sort of party?

At present the mass workers' parties wherever they exist are so dominated by the class-collaborationist, coalitionist right as to be little more than left-capitalist parties. The larger small parties of the left (the surviving 'official' CPs, Rifondazione Comunista, Die Linke) are *also* dominated by the coalitionist policy. To their left is a wilderness of bureaucratic-centralist sects.

The working class urgently needs new political parties, and a new International, which stand for the working class pursuing its independent interests. *What sort of party?* It is impossible to get out of where we are now without being willing to read the texts and the lessons of the early Comintern, but to do so *critically*. To accept the Comintern texts at face value produces bureaucratic-centralism and splittism. To take them at face value and reject them out of hand produces either complete inability to act (the anarchists, movementists, 'left' and 'council' communists, etc) or collapse back into the policy of unity with the right on the right's terms (the Labour left, etc).

The 'party of a new type' was *both* a real advance on the party

theory of the Second International *and* simultaneously part of the process of bureaucratisation of the Russian CP and hence of the parties of the Comintern. It is necessary to disentangle these elements and fight for a democratic centralism which is not a synonym for bureaucratic centralism.

The split in the Second International was not a sectarian error on the part of the communists. It was required by the unwillingness of the coalitionist right to act democratically. Marxists have to organise in a way which is *not dependent on* unity with the right. We have to accept that the split in the Second International will not be reversed (unless Marxists altogether abandon our politics and accept the corrupt world of Blairism, etc).

But splitting does *not* purge the movement of opportunism. It is a defensive necessity, not a means of offence. The way to fight opportunism is not to seek purity by separation or fear contamination with the touch of pitch: that road leads only to organisational sectarianism, coupled with political collapse *into* opportunism.

Rather we also have to fight for forms of *partial* unity with the right, so as both to achieve the maximum class unity *round particular goals* that can be achieved and to bring our politics into confrontation with the right's politics. That was for the Comintern, and remains today, the task of the policy of the united class front.

6 Unity in diversity

In the previous chapter we were concerned with the strategic split between communists and socialists. In this chapter we have to address the problem of unity that the split posed.

With the creation of the Comintern the *national* split which the 1914-18 war had caused in the broad, united socialist movement was replaced by an *organisational-ideological* split which affected the workers' parties in most countries. But with this split the problem of working class political unity in action did not go away, because it is deeply rooted in the nature of the movement. The policy or 'tactic' of the united class front was the Comintern's effort to tackle this problem.

Down to 1920 the Comintern's leaders were struggling for a clear and unambiguous split in the workers' movement. This split was necessary in order to escape the domination of the movement by the right and the fudges of the centre, which supported the domination of the right. But as soon as the split came about the working class's objective need for unity reasserted itself. The Comintern was now forced to try to find a way of addressing that need for unity without again subordinating the movement to the right.

British Labour

The starting point of the united front policy, before it was even expressed as such, was the Comintern's advice to the British communists on the Labour Party. The groups which formed the CPGB were divided on the question, some favouring and some opposing affiliation to Labour. The 1920 2nd Congress of the

Comintern debated the question and resolved that the Communist Party - then in process of formation - *should* affiliate. The proposal was quite clearly made on the basis that communists would have full freedom of agitation and organisation within the Labour Party.

Lenin argued that "... the Labour Party has let the British Socialist Party into its ranks, permitting it to have its own press organs, in which members of the selfsame Labour Party can freely and openly declare that the party leaders are social-traitors ... This shows that a party affiliated to the Labour Party is able not only to severely criticise but openly and specifically to mention the old leaders by name, and call them social-traitors. This is a very original situation ...

"In a private talk, comrade Pankhurst said to me: 'If we are real revolutionaries and join the Labour Party, these gentlemen will expel us.' But that would not be bad at all. Our resolution says that we favour affiliation insofar as the Labour Party permits sufficient freedom of criticism. On that point we are absolutely consistent."⁹¹

As a matter of judgment of the evolution of the Labour Party, these arguments are problematic. From its 1918 conference, the Labour Party was in process of transforming itself from a loose confederation into a party which combined limited affiliations with individual membership based on a political platform. In reality, the CP was not allowed to affiliate and individual communists' membership in the Labour Party was from a very early stage semi-legal.

The argument nonetheless shows that even at a time that the Comintern's leadership was still mainly concerned to complete the split with the centrists, they were willing to fight for participation of communists in a broader unity of the workers' movement - *provided that the communists retained liberty of agitation.*

The united front turn

The united front turn was animated by the fact that over the course of 1921 it became clear that the split had not purged the movement, but, on the contrary, the social democrats of the right and centre retained mass support in the working class.

In Italy the January 1921 split of the left from the right and centre of the Partito Socialista Italiano - urged on by the Comintern

leadership - left the communists as a small minority.

In March 1921 the German United Communist Party (VKPD) endeavoured to trigger the revolution artificially in the 'March action'. The attempt was a categorical failure and only emphasised the fact that the right-dominated SPD had majority support in the German working class.

At the Tours Congress in December 1920 the SFIO (French Section of the Workers' International, the Socialist Party) split. A three-quarters majority accepted the '21 conditions' and adhered to the Comintern as the Parti Communiste Français (PCF). A minority split to reconstitute the SFIO.

But of the SFIO's 69 parliamentary deputies only 13 joined the PCF, 56 going with the SFIO, and the SFIO also took the large majority of the local councillors. Over 1921 it also became clear that the SFIO had majority support in the trade unions, which expelled a communist-supported minority in December. By late 1921 it was evident that in spite of the numbers at Tours the SFIO actually had the majority in the broader workers' movement; and the SFIO was engaged in constructing the Cartel des Gauches left electoral bloc with the left bourgeois Radical Party (for the May 1922 local and 1924 general elections). This policy allowed them to present the communists as splitters of the unity of the left.

In this context the executive committee of the Comintern in December 1921 adopted the 'Theses on the united front'.⁹² They begin (theses 1-2) with the reassertion of the 'actuality of the revolution' in the form of a foreshortened perspective of economic crisis and war.

They then assert (theses 3-4) that, while a section of the most advanced workers had been won to place confidence in the communists, the advance of the class struggle had brought more backward layers into activity, and these were the source of the instinctive demand for unity.

This analysis makes the problem correspond to the situation in Russia in February 1917: the Bolsheviki had obtained a majority of the existing organised workers, but the outbreak of revolution brought onto the stage broad masses for whom Menshevik ideas were more

attractive. The same dynamic was visible in Portugal in 1974-75: the Communist Party *had been* the majority in the repressed workers' movement under the Salazar-Caetano dictatorship, but the advance of the mass movement allowed rapid and dramatic growth of the Socialist Party.

However, as an analysis of the situation in 1921 it was false: neither in Germany nor in Italy had the communists won a majority in the existing organised movement, and 1921 showed that in France the *apparent* majority of the existing organised movement won at Tours was in fact illusory.

The theses then assert that the split was necessary in order that the communists should "win freedom of agitation and propaganda" (thesis 5); that the communists are now fighting for unity of the workers *in action*, which the reformists reject (thesis 6); and that the reformists are using the slogan of unity to draw the workers into support for class collaboration (thesis 7). Hence the conclusion: "The overall interests of the communist movement require that the communist parties and the Communist International as a whole *support the slogan of a united workers' front* and take the initiative on this question into their own hands" (thesis 8).

Theses 9-16 attempt to concretise the idea in a series of individual countries, while thesis 17 calls on other communist parties to do likewise. Thesis 18 asserts a fundamental point:

"The executive committee of the Communist International considers that the chief and categorical condition, the same for all communist parties, is: the absolute autonomy and complete independence of every Communist Party entering into any agreement with the parties of the Second and Two-and-a-Half Internationals, and its freedom to present its own views and its criticisms of those who oppose the communists. While accepting the need for discipline in action, communists must at the same time retain both the right and the opportunity to voice, not only before and after but if necessary during actions, their opinion on the politics of all the organisations of the working class without exception. The waiving of this condition is not permissible in any circumstances. Whilst supporting the slogan of maximum unity of all workers' organisations in every *practical*

action against the capitalist front, communists cannot in any circumstances refrain from putting forward their views, which are the only consistent expression of the interests of the working class as a whole.”

The remaining theses discuss a series of discrete points (the Bolshevik experience, initiatives of the Comintern as a whole, problems of centrism within the communist parties, that unity in action of the working class must include the anarchists and syndicalists).

The Comintern returned to the question at its 4th Congress in December 1922. Thesis 10 of the ‘Theses on Comintern tactics’⁹³ reaffirmed the executive committee’s December 1921 theses, although the compression of the argument makes the text less fully transparent:

“At present the reformists need a split, while the communists are interested in uniting all the forces of the working class against capital. Using the united front tactic means that the communist vanguard is at the forefront of the day-to-day struggle of the broad masses for their most vital interests. For the sake of this struggle communists are even prepared to negotiate with the scab leaders of the social democrats and the Amsterdam International. Any attempt by the Second International to interpret the united front as an organisational fusion of all the ‘workers’ parties’ must of course be categorically repudiated ...

“The existence of independent communist parties and their complete freedom of action in relation to the bourgeoisie and counterrevolutionary social democracy is the most important historical achievement of the proletariat, and one which the communists will in no circumstances renounce. Only the communist parties stand for the overall interests of the whole proletariat.

“In the same way the united front tactic has nothing to do with the so-called ‘electoral combinations’ of leaders in pursuit of one or another parliamentary aim.”

And:

“The main aim of the united front tactic is to unify the working masses through agitation and organisation. The real success of the united front tactic depends on a movement ‘from below’, from the

rank and file of the working masses. Nevertheless, there are circumstances in which communists must not refuse to have talks with the leaders of the hostile workers' parties, providing the masses are always kept fully informed of the course of these talks. During negotiations with these leaders the independence of the Communist Party and its agitation must not be circumscribed."

We can draw from these texts (and others, such as Trotsky's March 1922 report, 'On the united front', specifically addressed to tactics in France⁹⁴) a clear understanding of the Comintern leadership's conception of the united front idea.

(1) The question is posed because the right wing still lead broad masses. The united front is not a permanent concept, but a road to a higher form of unity, in which the unity of the class is expressed in the Communist Party and Comintern.

(2) The idea is of the *workers'* united front. This has two aspects: (a) It is for the unity of the working class as a whole, in action for elementary common interests - ie, including the anarchists, etc; it is not merely an electoral or parliamentary combination of communists and socialists (ECCI thesis 23). (b) It is counterposed to the 'left unity' that includes liberal parties of the Cartel des Gauches and to the SPD's post-war coalition policy.

(3) It is the "chief and categorical condition" that the Communist Party must retain autonomy and independence and "its freedom to present its own views *and its criticisms of those who oppose the communists*" (emphasis added).

(4) It is a precondition for the application of this policy that the Communists should *have* a party (theses 5-6). The EC theses warn of the danger that the united front policy will be used as a basis for a reversion to an unorganised left in a broader fudged unity (theses 21-22). Equally, as Trotsky put it, "In cases where the Communist Party still remains an organisation of a numerically insignificant minority, the question of its conduct on the mass-struggle front does not assume a decisive practical and organisational significance. In such conditions, mass actions remain under the leadership of the old organisations which by reason of their still powerful traditions continue to play the decisive role" (point 3).

Abandonment

This conception was, in fact, very rapidly abandoned. The socialists, including their lefts, proved unwilling to enter into agreements for common action with the communists on these terms. The initial result was a period of zigzags between unity with elements of the left socialists and trade unionists on the basis of *self-censorship* of the communists in order to fudge the political differences between them, and simple denunciation of the ‘lefts’ by the communists and isolation of the communists.

An example of the utter confusion about *how* to apply the united front policy can be found in the case of the relationship between the British communists and the trade union ‘official lefts,’ and that between the Soviet trade unionists and the general council of the TUC, in the run-up to and during the 1926 General Strike.⁹⁵ Both the party and the Comintern zigzagged between promoting illusions in the ‘official lefts’ and simply denouncing them. A range of similar failures at the same period are discussed in Trotsky’s *The Third International after Lenin* (1928).⁹⁶

The late 1920s saw an abrupt shift to the ‘left’ in the Soviet Union (the turn to ‘class struggle in the countryside’ and forced collectivisation) and in the Comintern: in place of the united front policy, the task of the communist parties was now mainly to fight against the socialists. This turn was justified by the fact that the world situation, having passed through a period of post-war revolutionary crisis and a period of stabilisation in the mid-1920s, was now entering into a ‘third period’ of open crisis.⁹⁷ Trotsky called the new policy “third period of the Comintern’s errors”, and the expression, “third period”, as a description of dead-end sectarian isolationism has stuck. The new policy continued until, in 1933, it met with the utter disaster of the Nazi coup in Germany.

In response to the Nazi coup, the Comintern shifted again onto the terrain of unity through self-censorship. Dimitrov’s speech to the 1935 7th Congress of the Comintern introducing the new perspective contains a striking passage:

“‘The communists attack us,’ say others. But listen, we have repeatedly declared: We shall not attack anyone, whether persons,

organisations or parties, standing for the united front of the working class against the class enemy. But at the same time it is our duty, in the interests of the proletariat and its cause, to criticise those persons, organisations and parties that hinder unity of action by the workers.”⁹⁸

In fact, the Comintern went beyond unity through self-censorship and fudges to the concept of the ‘anti-fascist *people’s* front’. In doing so, they had decisively abandoned the early Comintern’s concept in which the united *workers* front was opposed to the coalitionism of the German SPD and the French Cartel des Gauches. They had, indeed, begun to situate themselves on the terrain of the coalitionist strategy of the old right wing of the Second International. This meant in turn that they had begun to abandon the whole strategic line of *Marxism as such*: that is, that the only road to socialism is the self-emancipation of the working class as a class.

Why did this happen? In retrospect, Trotsky and the Trotskyists analysed these shifts as driven by the evolution of the policy - in particularly foreign policy - of the Soviet bureaucracy and carried into effect by top-down bureaucratic control in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and Comintern. However, since 1945, we have seen repeated examples of *Trotskyist* organisations performing the same flip-flops between unity on the basis of self-censorship, followed by a sudden ‘leftist’ shift into ‘third period’ denunciations of the right wing of the workers’ movement as purely bourgeois and sectarian isolation. Sectarian isolation can equally be followed by a sudden shift into fudged unity on the basis of self-censorship: the evolution of the British SWP since 2000 has been a striking example.

The truth is that the dynamic was not solely driven by the Soviet bureaucracy and Stalinism as a *particular* caste-political form, but also by internal contradictions in the early Comintern policy. The key contradiction is between the ‘united front’ struggle for unity on the basis of freedom of criticism and of party/factional organisation in the *class movement as a whole*, and the 1921 rejection of unity on the basis of freedom of criticism and of factions in the *Communist Party as such* (discussed in more length in chapter five). To see why, it is necessary to go a level deeper into the theoretical grounds for supposing that the united class front is necessary.

The problem of unity

The working class *objectively needs* united action and united organisations. This flows from its underlying nature as a class. We saw this point already in chapter one. The proletariat is the whole class dependent on the wage fund, not the workers who happen to be currently employed (let alone any particular sector, such as ‘industrial workers’). Lacking property in the major means of production, workers need to organise collective action in order to defend their interests. That ‘unity is strength’ is therefore the elemental and indispensable basis of workers’ organisation.

But this need encounters two contradictions. The first is that both capital and the working class are *international* in character. A central statement in the 1864 ‘Inaugural address’ of the First International is still unqualifiedly true today: “Past experience has shown how disregard of that bond of brotherhood which ought to exist between the workmen of different countries, and incite them to stand firmly by each other in all their struggles for emancipation, will be chastised by the common discomfiture of their incoherent efforts.”⁹⁹

However, there are within the workers’ movement nationalist socialists and trade unionists loyal to the existing individual nation-states. The result is that there is a contradiction between unity of the working class as an international class and unity in any one country between nationalists and internationalists. The point is well made in Lenin and Zinoviev’s *Socialism and war*: “Unity with the opportunists *actually* means today subordinating the working class to ‘its’ national bourgeoisie, alliance with it for the purpose of oppressing other nations and of fighting for great-power privileges; it means *splitting* the revolutionary proletariat in all countries.”¹⁰⁰

Unity in diversity

The second contradiction is a little more difficult to explain. We can take it at a high level of abstraction or much more concretely. In abstraction, a workers’ organisation - whether trade union, party or whatever - is not an unconscious ‘organic unity’ like family, clan or peasant village. It is a *consciously created unity* which grows out of and negates/preserves the individualism of modern capitalist

society. In this aspect it foreshadows the future *freely* associated producers of socialism. But to be a consciously created unity it must inherently be a unity in diversity, an agreement to unite for partial common ends, while recognising the diverse individual opinions and wills. It is, indeed, the partial convergence of the individual opinions and wills which forms the basis of the possibility of consciously created unity.

This dialectic of individual and consciously created collective necessarily entails the possibility of collectives within the collective where - as is inevitable - there come to be disagreements within the larger collective.

At the level of the concrete, a workers' organisation of any size and geographical extent cannot run under capitalism on the basis of a pure distribution of tasks from meeting to meeting among members who do them in their free time. In the first place, the capitalists simply do not give workers enough free time, except in the form of pauperising and demoralising unemployment. In the second place, though we *seek to* make everyone a worker-leader, worker-manager or worker-intellectual (synonyms; call it what you will), in fact our ability under capitalism to overcome the petty-proprietor intelligentsia's monopoly of education and managerial and administrative skills is limited.

In practice we have to have full-timers, and these are either members of the intelligentsia/managerial middle class (petty proprietors of intellectual property) by background, or, if they originate as workers, become intelligentsia by training as full-timers. Full-time office itself can, moreover, be a type of property in the form of privileged access to information.

Any workers' organisation under capitalism therefore *inherently* entails a class contradiction between the proletarian ranks and the petty-proprietor officials. The anarchist 'solution' of dispensing with the full-timers is no solution at all: it either means no organisation or an organisation more completely dominated by members of the intelligentsia by background. The problem - which we already encountered in chapter two as an unsolved problem identified by the anarchists - is to find a road to *subordinating the*

full-timers to the membership.

There are several potential elements of such a road. But the main point is this: for the working class ranks to subordinate the middle class officials to themselves, it is utterly indispensable that the ranks have the freedom to organise without the say-so of the officials. We have already seen that organisation is indispensable to the working class pursuing its interests; this is just as true within the organisations that the working class itself creates as it is in the larger society.

This leads to the same conclusion as the first and more abstract point. To retain its character as an effective instrument of the proletariat as a class, a workers' organisation *must* have freedom to organise factions within its ranks. Indeed, the struggle of trends, platforms and factions is a normal and essential means by which its differences are collectivised and a unity created out of them. It *must* be a unity in diversity.

Unity in diversity can be denied to the movement in three ways. Bureaucratic suppression or exclusion of dissenting factions is an obvious one. Equally obvious is ultimatum refusal of unity for limited common action where that is possible, on the basis that there is insufficient agreement on other tasks.

The third and less obvious, but equally common, way is to fudge differences by diplomatic agreement to windy generalities, or to self-censor and thereby pretend that there is more agreement than there actually is. It was this last course of action which Marx and Engels attacked in their critiques of the 1875 Gotha programme.

Any of these courses of action denies the ranks of the workers' movement the possibility of choosing between opposing views, and is therefore antithetical to a real, effective unity of the movement.

Bureaucratic centralism versus the united front

In effect, the policy of the united front was a struggle for unity in action *of the whole working class*, combined with the open expression of differences. And this is an objective need of the proletariat not merely for the 'second period' (the restabilisation of capitalism in the mid-1920s), but *under all conditions*. But a deep grasp of this question eluded the Comintern: both the history of the

split and the 1921 adoption of the ban on factions precluded it.

The history of the split meant that half the justification offered for the split was to ‘purge’ the workers’ movement of opportunism: this justification is obviously opposed to any form of unity, even partial. The logic of the idea that a split would purge the workers’ movement of opportunism was expressed in the sectarianism of the ‘third period’.

The ban on factions was itself a direct denial of the need for unity in diversity *in the communist parties and Comintern*. The effect of this ban was that the communist parties came to replicate Blanquist groups or the secret Bakuninist dictatorial conspiracy of 1870-71.

This character was perfectly visible to left socialists - some of them ex-communists like Paul Levi - from 1921 onwards.¹⁰¹

The Comintern leaders had quite properly asserted that the united front was not a *permanent* policy, but a road to the reunification of the workers’ movement on a higher level, represented by the communist parties and International.

But the character of the communist parties under the post-1921 regime meant that they *could not* express the proletariat’s class need for unity in diversity. On the contrary, the bureaucratic dictatorship of the socialist right was now paralleled by a more ferocious bureaucratic dictatorship of the Communist Party apparatuses with its head in Moscow.

Once the communist parties had taken this form, the natural inference was that real unity in diversity was actually *impossible*. Unity in the *party* could not be unity in diversity: therefore, neither could broader unity. This left the only choices available as radical separation (‘third period’) or ‘fudging’ or diplomatic unity, in which the communists self-censored to conceal the actual differences between themselves and the left socialist or trade unionist leaders.

Taking diplomatic unity with the right wing of the workers’ movement seriously meant, necessarily, fudging over the difference between, on the one hand, the right’s coalitionist politics and, on the other, the politics of class independence.

When the Comintern leadership fully accepted this, the result was the politics of the people’s front.

Trotskyists and the united front

Trotsky was intimately involved in the creation of the Comintern policy of the united front. A great deal of his political struggle after he lost out in the battle for the leadership of the Russian Communist Party was focussed on it. His writings on Britain and China in the 1920s attacked the Comintern's diplomatic unity policy. Between 1928 and 1933 he battled in print against 'third period' sectarianism. In 1934-38 he counterposed the workers' united front to the Comintern's people's front policy, and at the same time battled against the diplomatic, fudging unity approach of the 'London bureau' of left socialist parties and of many of his own co-thinkers in the International Left Opposition and its successor organisations.

But Trotsky - in spite of participating in the Russian left's 1920s criticisms of the party regime - never escaped from the contradiction between the united front policy and the 1920 and 1921 theses on the organisational character of the communist parties. He internalised firmly the idea that before 1917 Lenin was right and he was wrong on the party question, and clung to the policies of the first four Congresses of the Comintern as an anchor in the shifting seas of the politics of the grouplets outside the mainstream of the socialist and communist parties.

The Trotskyists started with micro-groups. When they got bigger, they tended to 'Bolshevise' their parties, creating an overt or covert dictatorship of their petty bureaucracies. To such organisations a real commitment to unity in diversity of the workers' movement was as inconceivable as it was to the Stalinists. Unity had to be diplomatic: the alternative was sectarian self-isolation.

But the history of Trotsky's struggle for the united front policy meant that even in sectarian self-isolation the Trotskyists tended both (a) to attach themselves to sections of the mass movement, while self-censoring and hiding their own banner (as in Labour Party entry and similar tactics), and (b) to create 'fronts' which purported to be 'united fronts' of the left, but were in fact bureaucratically controlled by particular Trotskyist organisations: the Healyites' 'All Trade Union Alliance', the International Socialists-SWP's 'Rank and File Movements', the Lambertistes' 'Parti des Travailleurs' ('Workers'

Party’) and so on and on ...

The Mandelites actually constructed a theory which justifies diplomatic unity: Bensaid/Jebrac’s *dialectique d’unité et débordement* (dialectic of unity and overflowing, or outflanking). This theory was plagiarised by both John Ross and Tony Cliff and thereby found its way into the common sense of the British far left.

In this theory, the united front is a tactic and one applicable by a small group, rather than a policy for the whole of the working class. (Diplomatic) unity with the reformists, or a section of them, makes it possible to set the masses in motion in a particular struggle. The Trotskyists then demonstrate to these masses that they are better fighters *for this particular struggle*, and/or that they will not draw back from carrying *this particular struggle* to the end. As a result, the mobilised masses then turn to the Trotskyists.

The theory justifies diplomatic unity because the masses break with the reformists “in action, not in ideas”: with the implication that they do so in relation to their *particular* struggles. Unity with the reformists is essential to set the masses in motion; and on the *particular* struggles it is unnecessary for the Trotskyists to offer sharp criticism of the reformists, which might prevent unity: the mass struggle will find the reformists out.

Numerous Trotskyist groups endeavour to practise this ‘theory of the united front’ which has very little in common with the Comintern’s policy. The SWP, for example, has used it to justify its policies in the Anti-Nazi League, the Socialist Alliance, the anti-globalisation movement and Respect.

The underlying problem is that it is a variant of the sub-Bakuninist mass strike strategy discussed in chapter two. Once the masses, or even quite small layers of newly radicalising militants, *actually* begin to enter the political stage, they demand of the left not ‘good fighters’ on the particular struggle, but an *alternative political authority*. At once, this poses the question of a *party* in (at least) the Kautskyian sense. This requires addressing the full range of questions affecting the society as a whole.

Followers of the Bensaid/Jebrac version of the ‘united front’ are inherently obsessed with ‘action’ as the road to overcoming the

reformists, and therefore debar themselves from offering such answers. They also *hold back* militants who wish to go beyond the narrow aims of the particular struggle. The result is that, far from turning to the Trotskyists, these militants turn to parties which *are* prepared to offer broader policies.

The version of the 'united front' defended by 'New Left Trotskyists' has another and equally disastrous character. The Comintern policy of the united front is about unity of the working class movement as a whole. It is not about the sort of blocs of grouplets and prominent individual leftists which 'New Left Trotskyists' call 'united fronts'. Such blocs and agreements may, of course, be useful tactics. But dignifying them with the name of 'the united front' provides an excuse for sectarianism to present itself as 'non-sectarian'. It also *abandons to the reformist right the idea of unity of the working class movement as a whole*.

The split between communists, loyal to the working class as an international class, and coalitionist socialists, loyal to the nation-state, will never be 'healed' as long as communists insist on organising to fight for their ideas. The policy of the united workers' front is therefore an essential element of strategy in the fight for workers' power.

But this policy can only make sense as part of a larger struggle for unity in diversity. And this struggle is a struggle *against* - among other things - the Trotskyists' concept of the united front.

The 'workers' government slogan

In chapter two I argued that the 'strategy of the mass strike' foundered on the need of the society for a central coordinating authority: the mass strike wave, and the strike committees it throws up, break down the existing capitalist framework of authority, but do not provide an alternative. The resulting dislocation of the economy leads to pressure for a return to capitalist order.

The Kautskyan centre's solution to this problem was to build up the united workers' *party* and its associated organisations (trade unions, etc) as an alternative centre of authority. This gradual process could find its expression in the electoral results of the workers' party.

When it became clear that the workers' party had a majority of the popular vote, the workers' party would be justified in taking power away from the capitalists and implementing its minimum programme. If elections were rigged so that a popular majority did not produce a parliamentary majority, or legal or bureaucratic constitutional mechanisms were used to stop the workers' party implementing its programme, the use of the strike weapon, force, etc would be justified.

In implementing its programme, however, in Kautsky's view the workers' party would use the *existing* state bureaucratic apparatus: this merely reflected the need of 'modern society' for professional administration. In this respect Kautsky in his most revolutionary phase had already broken from the democratic republicanism of Marx's writings on the Commune and *Critique of the Gotha programme* and Engels' arguments in *Can Europe disarm?*

All power to the soviets?

In a series of arguments in spring 1917, and more elaborately in *State and revolution*, Lenin proposed an alternative: ‘All power to the soviets’. The soviets, he argued, represented the “Commune form of state” praised by Marx in *The civil war in France*, and the power of the soviets was the natural form of working class rule. On this basis the Bolsheviks spent much of spring-summer 1917 struggling to win a majority in the soviets. And the Bolshevik leadership and their Left Socialist Revolutionary and anarchist allies launched the October revolution under the banner of the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet and timed it to coincide with the October 25 meeting of the All-Russia Congress of Soviets - which turned out to have a Bolshevik majority and a far more overwhelming majority for ‘All power to the soviets’.

I have already argued in chapter two that the belief that ‘All power to the soviets’ represented an alternative political authority was mistaken. The Russian soviets came closer than any other historical body of workers’ councils to creating a national political authority. They did so because until October 25 the Menshevik and SR leaderships continued to believe that they had a majority in the soviets nationwide, and one which could serve as a *support for* the provisional government pending the creation by the constituent assembly of a ‘proper’ - ie, parliamentary - democracy.

No other ‘reformist’ or bureaucratic mass party has made the same mistake of using its own resources to develop a national coordination of workers’ councils. No far left formation or alliance has proved able to create such a coordination against the will of the existing mass parties.

Moreover, as several anarchist critics of Bolshevism recognise, the soviets were far from simple workers’ councils consisting of factory delegates. They contained the workers’ and peasants’ parties, and their political role was animated by the political role of the workers’ and peasants’ parties. October did indeed create a central coordinating authority for Russia: the Sovnarkom, or council of people’s commissioners. But this was ... a provisional government based on the *parties* that supported ‘All power to the soviets’: initially

a Bolshevik government with indirect support from a wider coalition in the soviets, then from November a formal coalition of the Bolsheviks and Left SRs with some passive support from the Menshevik-Internationalists; after the Brest-Litovsk treaty led the Left SRs to withdraw, a purely Bolshevik government.

Nor could Sovnarkom base itself fully on the soviets and their militia aspect. As I have said, the soviets did not attain a governing character, but met episodically rather than in continuous session; the militia proved insufficient to hold back either the Germans or the Whites, so that Sovnarkom was forced to create a regular army and with it a bureaucratic apparatus. The problem of authority *over* the state bureaucracy was unsolved. Lenin and the Bolsheviks fell back on the forms of authority in their party and, as these proved a problem in the civil war, almost unthinkingly militarised their party and created a top-down, bureaucratic regime.

All power to the Communist Party?

The 2nd Congress of the Comintern in 1920 in its 'Theses on the role of the Communist Party in the proletarian revolution'¹⁰² recognised this reality: that it is a *party or parties*, and a *government* created by a party or parties, that can pose an alternative form of authority to the capitalist order. But the theses over-theorised this recognition and carried with it organisational conceptions that prevented the working class as a class exercising power through the Communist Party and communist government.

Thesis 5 says that "Political power can only be seized, organised and led by a political party, and in no other way. Only when the proletariat has as a leader an organised and tested party with well-marked aims and with a tangible, worked-out programme for the next measures to be taken, not only at home but also in foreign policy, will the conquest of political power not appear as an accidental episode, but serve as the starting point for the permanent communist construction of society by the proletariat."

And thesis 9 asserts: "The working class does not only need the Communist Party before and during the conquest of power, but also after the transfer of power into the hands of the working class.

The history of the Communist Party of Russia, which has been in power for almost three years, shows that the importance of the Communist Party does not diminish after the conquest of power by the working class, but on the contrary grows extraordinarily.”

However, the political ground given for these claims is the argument for the vanguard character of the party (theses 1-3). And a critical conclusion drawn is the need for strict Bonapartist centralism (“iron military order”) in party organisation (theses 13-17). I discussed both of these in chapter five and identified how they can serve to destroy the character of the party as one through which the proletariat can rule.

In fact, both arguments are wholly unnecessary to the proposition that “political power can only be seized, organised and led by a political party” (thesis 5). This proposition follows merely from the original arguments of the Marxists against the Bakuninists and opponents of working class participation in elections. If the working class is to take power, it must lead the society as a whole. To do so, it must address all questions animating politics in the society as a whole and all its elements. To do so is to *become* a political party even if you call yourself an ‘alliance’ or ‘unity coalition’ or whatever - or a ‘trade union’, as the small revived ‘Industrial Workers of the World’ group calls itself. To fail to do so is to fail even as an ‘alliance’ or ‘unity coalition’.

Party-states everywhere

The converse of these points is that in the transition to capitalist modernity every state becomes in a certain sense a party-state. A critical difference between the successful dynastic absolutists in much of continental Europe and the failed Stuart absolutists is that the Bourbon, Habsburg and Hohenzollern absolutists *made themselves* prisoners of a party - the party which was to emerge, largely bereft of its state, as the ‘party of order’ in 19th century Europe. The Stuarts, following an older statecraft, *avoided* becoming prisoners of a party. James I, Charles I, Charles II and James II all endeavoured to manoeuvre between the Anglican-episcopal variant of the party of order, outright catholics, and Calvinist critics of Anglican-

episcopaliamism, in order to preserve their freedom of action as monarchs. This policy of preserving the individual monarch's personal freedom of action destroyed the political basis necessary to preserve the dynastic regime.

The result was a new sort of party-state: the revolution-state created in Britain in 1688-1714. This state was politically based on a bloc of Whigs and revolution (Williamite and later Hanoverian) Tories. The Jacobites, who clung to the Stuart dynasty, and the catholics, were excluded from political power and episodically repressed.

In the American revolution similarly what was created was a Whig party-state. The Whigs differentiated into Federalists and Democratic-Republicans, but outright Tories were largely driven out of the society.

The dialectical opposite occurred in Britain in the late 18th to early 19th century. Classical Whiggism was largely marginalised and the state became - as it is today - a Hanoverian-Tory party-state, successively dominated by Liberal-Tory and Conservative-Tory parties and, since 1945 by Conservative-Tories and Labour-Tories.

A similar story might be told of the French revolution. At the end of the day the result of the French revolution is a republican party-state in which catholic monarchist legitimism is excluded from political power; and since 1958 a Gaullist party-state dominated by Gaullist-Gaullist and Socialist-Gaullist parties.

The idea that political power can only be taken by a party or party coalition and that the resulting new state is necessarily a party-state does not, therefore, at all imply the tyrannous character of the party-state created in the Soviet Union and imitated in many other countries. This tyrannous character reflects the decision of the Bolsheviks (a) to create Bonapartist centralism within their party and (b) to use state repression (the ban on factions, etc) to resist the natural tendency of the party to split within the framework of the common party identification created by the new *state form*. Behind these decisions, as I argued before, is the fact that the Russian party-state created in 1918-21 was socially based on the peasantry.

Suppose that we fight for 'extreme democracy', as the CPGB has argued we should, and have in our party programme a series of

concrete measures to this end. The existing state falls, and some party or coalition of parties based on this aim forms a provisional revolutionary government. We proceed to reconstruct the state order along the lines of extreme democracy. The resulting state will *be* a party-state of the ‘extreme democrats’. To the extent that an ‘extreme democrat’ *coalition* takes power, by doing so it will *become* a single party and the ‘parties’ within it, factions.

The ‘parliamentarists’ or ‘rule of law party’ (probably composed of several Labour, Conservative, Liberal, etc *factions*) will be excluded from political power, just as Jacobites were excluded from political power in post-revolutionary Britain, Tories in the post-revolutionary US, and monarchists in post-revolutionary France. They will be excluded from political power in the same sense that islamists are ‘excluded’ from political power if they do not monopolise it. That is, their constitutional ideas will be *subordinated to* the extreme-democratic regime and marginalised by it. They will quite possibly turn to terrorism and have to be repressed.

But the fact that the state is a party-state, in which the minority which opposes the new state form will be ‘excluded’ from power and - if they resist - repressed, does not in the least imply that the party-state cannot have parties (or factions) within it. A party-state as a *one-party* state, complete with a ban on factions, expresses the class interest of the petty proprietors, as *opposed to* the class interest of the proletariat. Suppose, instead, a single communist party takes power and creates radical-democratic state forms. It is to be expected that this party, while retaining a common party identification in relation to the revolution and the state, will break up into factions (or parties within the common state party) over major policy differences.

All of this would be true with the names and some of the concrete detail changed if we replaced “extreme democracy” with “all power to workers’ councils” and a ‘councilist’ party or coalition formed a provisional revolutionary government.

The united front and the workers’ government

The Comintern’s united front turn in 1921-22 meant recognising the reality that there was more than one party of the working class,

although the communists hoped to displace the socialists as the main party. In this context, 'All power to the soviets' could not express the working class's need for an alternative central coordinating authority; but neither could 'All power to the Communist Party'.

The 4th Comintern Congress in 1922 adopted as thesis 11 of its 'Theses on tactics' the slogan of the "workers' government, or workers' and peasants' government". The thesis is relatively short but quite complex.¹⁰³

It begins with the proposition that the slogan can be used as a "general agitational slogan". In this sense the "workers' government" is clearly intended to be merely a more comprehensible way of expressing the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In some countries, however, "the position of bourgeois society is particularly unstable and where the balance of forces between the workers' parties and the bourgeoisie places the question of government on the order of the day as a practical problem requiring immediate solution.

In these countries the workers' government slogan follows inevitably from the entire united front tactic." The socialists are advocating and forming coalitions with the bourgeoisie, "whether open or disguised". The communists counterpose to this "a united front involving all workers, and a coalition of all workers' parties around economic and political issues, which will fight and finally overthrow bourgeois power".

The paragraph continues: "Following a united struggle of all workers against the bourgeoisie, the entire state apparatus must pass into the hands of a workers' government, so strengthening the position of power held by the working class." This statement is extremely unclear. At a minimum it could mean that all the government *ministries* must be held by members of the workers' coalition; more probably that there would be a significant purge of the senior civil service, army tops and judiciary to give the workers' coalition control; at the furthest extreme, that the whole state apparatus down to office clerks and soldiers should be sacked and replaced by appointees of the workers' coalition.

A critical paragraph follows: "The most elementary tasks of a

workers' government must be to arm the proletariat, disarm the bourgeois counterrevolutionary organisations, bring in control over production, shift the main burden of taxation onto the propertied classes and break the resistance of the counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie." This is the only statement of the substantive tasks or minimum platform of a workers' government in the thesis.

Such a government "is possible only if it is born out of the struggle of the masses and is supported by combative workers' organisations formed by the most oppressed sections of workers at grassroots level. However, even a workers' government that comes about through an alignment of parliamentary forces - ie, a government of purely parliamentary origin - can give rise to an upsurge of the revolutionary workers' movement."

This pair of statements amounts to a non-dialectical contradiction. It is illusory to suppose *both* (a) that a workers' government can *only be possible* if it is born out of the mass struggle and supported by mass organisations - ie, soviets - *and* (b) that a parliamentary coalition agreement can *cause* an upsurge of the mass movement. The contradiction reflects the absence of a full theorisation of the prior transition in the Comintern leadership's collective thought from 'All power to the soviets' to 'All power to the Communist Party'. The first proposition is within the framework of 'All power to the soviets', and in a fairly strong sense is within the framework of the mass strike strategy. The second is more like Kautskyan strategy in the most 'revolutionary' reading that can be given to *The road to power*.

The next paragraph addresses communist participation in coalition governments. This requires (a) "guarantees that the workers' government will conduct a real struggle against the bourgeoisie of the kind already outlined", and (b) three organisational conditions: (1) communist ministers "remain under the strictest control of their party"; (2) they "should be in extremely close contact with the revolutionary organisations of the masses"; and (3) "The Communist Party has the unconditional right to maintain its own identity and complete independence of agitation."

This amounts to a government without collective responsibility.

But a government without collective responsibility is not a decision-making mechanism for the society as a whole - ie, not a government at all.

The thesis tells us that there are dangers in the policy. To identify these, it points out that there are several types of government that can be called a workers' government but are not "a truly proletarian, socialist government". In this respect, the thesis continues the line of 'All power to the Communist Party': "The complete dictatorship of the proletariat can only be a genuine workers' government ... consisting of communists."

But "Communists are also prepared to work alongside those workers who have not yet recognised the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Accordingly communists are also ready, in certain conditions and with certain guarantees, to support a non-communist workers' government. However, the communists will still openly declare to the masses that the workers' government can be neither won nor maintained without a revolutionary struggle against the bourgeoisie."

The minimum platform

The "certain conditions and ... certain guarantees" must be those stated earlier. But in this context it becomes apparent that the minimum platform, the "most elementary tasks of a workers' government", is utterly inadequate as a basis for deciding whether communists should participate in a coalition government or remain in opposition.

- "Arm the proletariat, disarm the bourgeois counterrevolutionary organisations." This is a statement of general principle. *How?* Disarming the bourgeoisie, in the sense of the possession of weapons by individual bourgeois, is a task that can only be performed through the exercise of military force. More practically, disarming the bourgeoisie means breaking the loyalty of the existing soldiers to the state regime.

This, in reality, is also the key to arming the proletariat: as long as the army of the capitalist state remains *politically* intact, the proletarians will at best be equipped with civilian small-arms - not

much of a defence against tanks and helicopter gunships. The tsarist regime was disarmed by the decay of discipline caused by defeat in the run-up to February and by the effects, from February, of the Petrograd Soviet's Order No1, opening up the army to democratic politics.

- "Bring in control over production." This phrase is nicely ambiguous. *What sort of control?* If what is meant is workers' control in the factories, it is utterly illusory to suppose that a *government* could do more than call for it and support it: the workers would have to *take* control for themselves.

If what is meant is the creation of sufficient planning and rationing to deal with immediate economic dislocation caused by the bourgeoisie's endeavours to coerce the workers' government, this implies much more concrete measures, such as closure of the financial markets and nationalisation of the banks and other financial institutions; seizure into public hands of capitalist productive firms that endeavour to decapitalise or close, whether or not this is to lead to long-term nationalisation; the introduction of rationing of essential goods (food, etc) that become scarce as a result of capitalist endeavours to withdraw their capital ... and so on.

- "Shift the main burden of taxation onto the propertied classes." This is a less precise version of the demand of the *Communist manifesto* for a sharply progressive income tax. Its vagueness, in fact, makes it empty. A sharply progressive income tax strengthens the position of the working class both because it is directly redistributive against the possessing classes, and because its existence asserts limits on market inequality. It is for this reason that the right in the US, in Britain, and across Europe, has begun the fight to cash in its political gains of the last 25 years in the form of 'flat taxes'.

However, all taxes come out of the social surplus product, and thus at the end of the day the main burden of all taxation is at the expense of the propertied classes: if the taxes on workers are raised, the result is in the long run to force capitalists to pay these taxes in the form of wages. The slogan is thus empty and is in fact diplomatic in character.

- "Break the resistance of the counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie."

This point is so empty of content as to need no further comment.

An empty slogan

Without a clear minimum platform, the idea of a workers' government reduces to what it began with - a more 'popular' expression for the idea that the workers should rule - or to what it ends with - a communist government. It does not amount to a basis for working out *concrete* proposals for unity addressed to the workers who follow the socialist parties.

This is made visible in Trotsky's 'Report on the 4th Congress'.¹⁰⁴ Trotsky's initial account of the workers' government policy is as an alternative to counterpose to the socialists' coalitionism: one that expresses in a very basic way the idea of class independence.

Trotsky expresses the view that there *might* be a workers' (or workers' and farmers') government in the sense of the Bolshevik-Left SR coalition of November 1917 - March 1918 - ie, a government of communists and left socialists as the beginning of the dictatorship of the proletariat. But the fact that this coalition was based on a very concrete minimum platform - the distributive land policy as the solution to the food problem, peace without annexations, and 'All power to the soviets' - is wholly absent from this description.

The question becomes concrete in relation to Saxony, where the SPD and KPD together had a majority in the *Land* assembly and the local SPD proposed to the KPD a provincial government of the workers' parties. The Comintern congress told the KPD to reject this proposal. But the reasons given by Trotsky are not political reasons that could readily be explained to the ranks and supporters of the SPD:

"If you, our German communist comrades, are of the opinion that a revolution is possible in the next few months in Germany, then we would advise you to participate in Saxony in a coalition government and to utilise your ministerial posts in Saxony for the furthering of political and organisational tasks and for transforming Saxony in a certain sense into a communist drill ground so as to have a revolutionary stronghold already reinforced in a period of preparation for the approaching outbreak of the revolution. But this would be possible only if the pressure of the revolution were already making

itself felt, only if it were already at hand. In that case it would imply only the seizure of a single position in Germany which you are destined to capture as a whole. But at the present time you will of course play in Saxony the role of an appendage, an impotent appendage because the Saxon government itself is impotent before Berlin, and Berlin is - a bourgeois government.”

This is at best a vulgarised form of the arguments of Engels and Kautsky against minority participation of a workers' party in a left bourgeois government.

Misunderstandings

The emptiness of the Comintern's 'workers' government' slogan had several sources. 'All power to the soviets' as a general strategy was intimately linked to the sub-Bakuninist mass strike strategy, which ignored or marginalised the problem of coordinating authority, and government is a particular form of coordinating authority.

'All power to the Communist Party' had the effect of emptying out the programme of the party in relation to questions of state form, because the Bolsheviks in 1918-21 had effectively abandoned this programme: the workers were in substance invited to trust the communist leaders because they were 'really' committed to fighting the capitalists.

When, within this framework, the Comintern proposes the possibility of a socialist-communist coalition, it can say nothing more than that the condition for such a government is that it must be 'really committed to fighting the capitalists': this is the meaning of the empty statements of abstract general principle which form the minimum platform in the thesis.

The *concrete* minimum platform used by the Bolsheviks in summer-autumn 1917, which formed the basis of the government coalition created in October - summarised in the tag, "Land, peace and bread: all power to the soviets" - is very precisely adapted to Russian conditions at the time. Any government coalition proposal elsewhere would need to have a similarly highly concrete and highly localised character. At the *international* level, the minimum government policy that would allow the communists to accept

government responsibility would have to be concerned with *state form* and how to render the state accountable to the working class, leaving the national parties to identify the particular concrete economic, foreign policy, etc measures by which these principles could be rendered agitational in the *immediate* concrete circumstances of their country.

Trotsky's argument for the slogan in the 1938 *Transitional programme* gets halfway to this point: "Of all parties and organisations which base themselves on the workers and peasants and speak in their name, we demand that they break politically from the bourgeoisie and enter upon the road of struggle for the workers' and farmers' government. On this road we promise them full support against capitalist reaction. At the same time, we indefatigably develop agitation around those transitional demands which should in our opinion form the programme of the 'workers' and farmers' government'"¹⁰⁵

The problem is that the "transitional demands" of this programme address state power only in the form of 'All power to the soviets'. They therefore either remain abstract or become economic, as in the various British left groups' slogan: 'Labour government committed to socialist policies'.

The most fundamental misunderstanding appears at the very beginning of the Comintern thesis. *In some countries* "the position of bourgeois society is particularly unstable and ... the balance of forces between the workers' parties and the bourgeoisie places the question of government on the order of the day as a practical problem requiring immediate solution."

In reality, in parliamentary regimes *every general election* poses the question of government - and every general round of local elections also poses it, since it indicates the electoral relationship of forces between the parties at national level. (In presidential regimes the question of government is *formally* only posed in presidential elections, but is indirectly posed in elections to the legislature).

The fact that it does so is central to the mechanism of the two-party system of corrupt politicians by which the capitalist class rules *at the daily level* in parliamentary regimes. The system was invented in Britain after the revolution of 1688 and has since been copied almost

everywhere.

The patronage powers of government allow a party to manage the parliamentary assembly, to promote its own electoral support and to make limited changes in the interests of its base and/or its ideology. The ‘outs’ therefore seek by any means to be ‘in’. In this game the bureaucratic state core quite consciously promotes those parties and individual politicians who are more loyal to *its* party ideology. The result is that outside exceptional circumstances of extreme crisis of the *state* order, it is only possible to form a government on the basis of a coalition in which those elements loyal to the state-party have a veto.

Those socialists who insist that the immediate task of the movement is to fight for a socialist *government* - outside extreme crisis of the state - necessarily enter into the game and become socialist-loyalists.

Eighteenth century British ‘commonwealthsmen’ and republicans understood the nature of the game better than 20th-century socialists and communists. Their solution was to reduce the powers of patronage of the central government bureaucracy and its ability to control the agenda of the legislature. They were defeated, in Britain by the Tory revival, in the early US by the Federalist party; republicans in France were defeated by Bonapartism. But their ideas echo in Marx’s writings on the Commune, in Marx and Engels’ attacks on Lassalleanism, and in Engels’ critique of the Erfurt programme.

Political platform

This understanding enables us to formulate a core *political* minimum platform for the participation of communists in a government. The key is to replace the illusory idea of ‘All power to the soviets’ and the empty one of ‘All power to the Communist Party’ with the original Marxist idea of *the undiluted democratic republic*, or ‘extreme democracy’, as the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

This implies:

- universal military training and service, democratic political and trade union rights within the military, and the right to keep and bear arms;

- election and recallability of all public officials; public officials to be on an average skilled workers' wage;
- abolition of official secrecy laws and of private rights of copyright and confidentiality;
- self-government in the localities: ie, the removal of powers of central government control and patronage and abolition of judicial review of the decisions of elected bodies;
- abolition of constitutional guarantees of the rights of private property and freedom of trade.

There are certainly other aspects; more in the CPGB's *Draft programme*. These are merely points that are particularly salient to me when writing. A workers' government policy as a united front policy would have to combine these issues, summed up as the struggle for 'the undiluted democratic republic' or 'extreme democracy', with salient *immediate* (not 'transitional') demands, such as (for Britain now) the abolition of the anti-union laws, an end to the Private Finance Initiative, the renationalisation of rail and the utilities.

Without commitment to such a minimum platform, communists should not accept governmental responsibility as a minority. Contrary to Trotsky's argument on Saxony, whether the conditions are 'revolutionary' or not makes no difference to this choice. To accept governmental responsibility as a minority under conditions of revolutionary crisis is, if anything, *worse* than doing so in 'peaceful times': a crisis demands urgent solutions, and communists can only offer these solutions from opposition.

What we should be willing to do - if we had MPs - is to put forward for enactment individual elements of our minimum programme, and to support *individual proposals* - say, of a Labour government - which are consistent with our minimum programme.

The point of such a policy would be to force the supporters of the Labour left in Britain, leftwingers in the coalitionist parties in Europe, and so on, to confront the choice between loyalty to the *state-party* and loyalty to the working class. But in order to apply such a policy we would first have to have a Communist Party commanding 10%-20% of the popular vote.

As I argued in chapter six, it is illusory to suppose that the policy

of the united front can be applied as a substitute for overcoming the division of the Marxist left into competing sects. Without a united Communist Party, the various 'workers' government' and 'workers' party' formulations of the Trotskyists are at best empty rhetoric, at worst excuses for a diplomatic policy towards the official lefts.

Fight for an opposition

We saw in chapter three that the Kautskyan centre, which deliberately refused coalitions and government participation, was able to build up powerful independent workers' parties. In chapter five we saw that the post-war communist parties could turn into Kautskyan parties, and as such could - even if they were small - play an important role in developing class consciousness and the mass workers' movement. This possibility was available to them precisely because, though they *sought* to participate in government coalitions, the bourgeoisie and the socialists did not trust their loyalty to the state and used every means possible to exclude them from national government.

The Kautskyans were right on a fundamental point. Communists can only take power when we have won *majority* support for working class rule through extreme democracy. 'Revolutionary crisis' may accelerate processes of changing political allegiance, but it does not alter this fundamental point or offer a way *around* it. There are no short cuts, whether by coalitionism or by the mass strike.

The present task of communists/socialists is therefore not to fight for an alternative *government*. It is to fight to build an alternative *opposition*: one which commits itself unambiguously to self-emancipation of the working class through extreme democracy, as *opposed to* all the loyalist parties.

8

Political consciousness and international unity

It has already been a running undercurrent in this book that the class struggle between capitalist and proletarian is international in character and therefore requires the proletariat to organise as a class internationally.

The point surfaced in chapter one in the form of Marx and Engels' criticisms of the Gotha unification. It reappeared in chapter two: the commitment of the coalitionist right in the Second International to managing the capitalist nation-state involved them in the logic of attacks on the working class for the sake of 'national competitiveness'; and in chapter three: the Kautskyan centre's national horizons ultimately led it to support feeding the European working class into the mincing machine of World War I.

The question of internationalism as an element of working class strategy was also critical in understanding the split in the Second International, in the subsequent chapters: fighting for unity of the workers as an international class unavoidably involved splitting with the coalitionist right, which placed (and places) loyalty to the nation-state before loyalty to the working class.

The Comintern characterised the Second International's collapse in the face of 1914 as resulting in part from its failure to organise real international unity, and proposed as an alternative a much more tightly centralised and disciplined international. Yet the Comintern was dissolved in 1943, leaving behind the looser Cominform of communist parties which, like the socialist parties, were fundamentally nationalist in their strategic horizons.

The Trotskyists founded their 'Fourth International' in 1938 as

a “*world party* of socialist revolution” - something in theory even more centralised than the Comintern. In 1953 this “world party” broke up into two competing organisations, the International Secretariat of the Fourth International (ISFI), the predecessor of today’s Mandeliste Fourth International, and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

The European core of the ISFI has remained relatively stable as an international organisation (the same cannot be said for its politics). The current Mandeliste FI has become unequivocally an organisation like the *Second* International. That is, it is a loose coordination of national parties (in this case, mostly grouplets), whose leaders meet periodically and pass diplomatic resolutions.

The ICFI ‘tradition’ has given rise to a bewildering range of ‘internationalists’ - Healyite and sub-Healyite variants, Lambertiste and sub-Lambertiste, Lorista and sub-Lorista, Morenista and sub-Morenista, Spartacist and sub-Spartacist, and so on. Almost all of these ‘internationalists’ are the international fan clubs of national organisations in the main historic centres of Trotskyism: France, the US, Britain and Argentina.

Meanwhile, Trotskyist organisations that were originally purely national in character, such as the French Lutte Ouvrière, the British Militant (both Grantite and Taaffeite wings) and the British Socialist Workers Party and Workers Power, have created their own ‘internationalists’ or ‘international tendencies’.

This plethora of international *sects* has had the effect among broad layers of activists of discrediting the entire idea of an organised workers’ international political movement. ‘Internationalism’ has as a result become reduced to two elements. The first is efforts to promote and/or reform the United Nations and the ‘international rule of law’. Whatever their intentions, these actually serve to give political *support* to the global, US-led, capitalist system of nation-states.¹⁰⁶

The second is fundamentally liberal ‘international solidarity campaigns’ around hot spots in global politics, based on moral hatred of suffering and injustice rather than on a positive strategy for international action of *the working class*. These campaigns do some useful work but lead nowhere and rarely reach deeply into the

working class.

To the extent that there is a 'strategy' involved in 'anti-imperialist internationalism' of this sort, it is the Maoist/third-worldist idea of 'surrounding the cities': ie, that revolution in the colonial world can overthrow the imperialist world order. The present character of the Chinese and Vietnamese regimes - and all the other formerly radical third-worldist regimes - all too clearly shows the falsity of this strategy.

Around the year 2000 there appeared to be a small glimmer of hope for a renewed broad international movement in the anti-globalisation movement and the World Social Forums. But the bureaucracies of the major national parties and unions and the NGOs supporting this movement have combined with the dominance of anarchistic 'movementist' ideas in the ranks to produce a series of, no doubt interesting, periodic talking shops.

The 'direct action' alternative in the anti-globalisation movement largely represents merely an opportunity for some youth to have a barney with the police. After the first media shocks of the 1990s, this has had about as much practical political effect as if the same militants were to expend the same energy fighting the police after football matches.

The root of this catastrophe is that the Second, Third and Fourth Internationals shared a common false conception of the role of the international action of the working class in revolutionary strategy, and that the Third and Fourth superimposed on this error a *particular* variant of the Comintern's Bonapartist centralism, the idea of the "general staff of world revolution". The result has been to produce international sects on the one hand, and a reaction away from *proletarian* internationalism and international organisation in negative-dialectical response to the international sects.

The Communist League that issued the *Communist manifesto* was a small group, mainly composed of migrants, together with some supporters among Paris artisans and a section of the left wing of the British Chartist movement. "Communists of various nationalities have assembled in London and sketched the following manifesto, to be published in the English, French, German, Italian, Flemish and Danish languages" (*Communist manifesto*). The migrant core of the League,

and Marx's and Engels' combination of "German philosophy, French socialism and English political economy" reflected the international character of the larger democratic movement of which this was part.

The voice of this tendency was to be amplified by the 1848 revolution in Germany, albeit the actual Communist League did not survive the defeat of this revolution. This revolution in turn was part of a European revolutionary wave extending from France to Hungary which from beginning to end took place within the space of a couple of years.

The First International was launched on the back of the campaigns of British radicals and the workers' movement in 1862-63 to prevent Britain intervening on the side of the slaveowner Confederacy in the American civil war. The immediate moment of its launch in 1864 was an appeal by London trade union leaders to Paris workers' leaders for joint action in support of the Polish struggle for independence. Its activity consisted of a combination of international strike support - both financial and through urging secondary action - with political interventions against national oppression (Poland, Ireland) and against threats of war.¹⁰⁷

The Second International was prepared by attempts in the early 1880s to unite European socialists, but took its real impetus as a movement from the Chicago Haymarket massacre of 1884 and the consequent struggle for May Day as an international workers' festival. The International was formally founded in 1889 and made the struggle for May Day a symbolic centre of its work.

An international of symbols

The Second International remained until 1900 merely a series of socialist congresses that passed resolutions, without a leading body equivalent to the general council of the First International which could respond rapidly to events or organise strike solidarity. In 1900, the International Socialist Bureau was established. The online catalogue of the archives held in Amsterdam by the International Institute of Social History suggests - although the IISH's holdings may well be defective - that the ISB was, proportionately, considerably less active than the general council of the First International had been.¹⁰⁸

The First International had been an international of practical tasks; the Second International was, starting with May Day, mainly one of symbols. Why? The fundamental explanation is that its leaders thought that the struggle for workers' power was one conducted within the boundaries of single countries: following Marx and Engels, that "the proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie" (*Communist manifesto*).

It is not clear how far Marx and Engels still believed this in their later lives. After all, the 1864 'Inaugural address' of the First International had asserted that: "Past experience has shown how disregard of that bond of brotherhood which ought to exist between the workmen of different countries, and incite them to stand firmly by each other in all their struggles for emancipation, will be chastised by the common discomfiture of their incoherent efforts."¹⁰⁹

And Engels, in his 1875 letter to Bebel criticising the Gotha programme, had commented that the German party should be "conscious of its solidarity with the workers of all other countries and will, as before, always be ready to meet the obligations that solidarity entails. Such obligations, even if one does not definitely proclaim or regard oneself as part of the 'international', consist, for example, in aid, abstention from blacklegging during strikes, making sure that the party organs keep German workers informed of the movement abroad, agitation against impending or incipient dynastic wars and, during such wars, an attitude such as was exemplarily maintained in 1870 and 1871, etc."¹¹⁰

However, after the split with the Bakuninists, Marx and Engels *had* supported the move away from maintaining the International as such in favour of building national parties that organised working class political action at *national* level.¹¹¹ The logic of this policy was, as we have already seen, to place the major emphasis on the growth and strength of these national parties, ultimately if necessary implying the pursuance of a revolutionary-defencist policy in war (chapter three).

Strategic problem

Marx and Engels did not much discuss the *relation between* the national revolutions supposed by the claim that "the proletariat of each

country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie” and the international character of the workers’ movement posed by the Communist League and the First International.

Nor did Marx, in his critique of the Gotha programme, draw out the strategic implications of his comment that “the ‘framework of the present-day national state’ - for instance, the German empire - is itself, in its turn, economically ‘within the framework’ of the world market, politically ‘within the framework’ of the system of states. Every businessman knows that German trade is at the same time foreign trade, and the greatness of Herr Bismarck consists, to be sure, precisely in his pursuing a kind of *international* policy.”¹¹²

It is commonly said that generals tend to plan to fight the last war. 1848 was an international revolutionary wave in which more or less simultaneous national upsurges were obviously part of a common international movement. Marx and Engels fairly clearly saw this experience of their youth as a model for the future revolutionary moment.

It did not appear. Instead, the period was dominated by a series of national movements and short European wars: the Crimea in 1854-56, the Franco-Austrian war (1859) and unification of Italy (1860), the Austro-Prussian war (1866) and the Franco-Prussian war (1870), which led to the Paris Commune.

The defeat of the Commune in 1871, the split in the International with the Bakuninists in 1872, and the defeat of the Spanish revolution in 1873 shifted at least Engels’ thinking towards what was to become Kautskyism: the patient work of building up the organised forces of the working class, carried on mainly through national politics. In the parties of the Second International, this evolved into a clear conception that the working class could take power in individual countries as the conditions in these countries became ‘ripe’ for socialism.

The logic of this evolution was to be most fully brought out in Kautsky’s *Preparations for peace* (October 1914): “Democracy can only find its best expression in a state which consists of one nation, speaking one language. Modern production brings the people ever into closer touch with each other. The more the inner divisions fall

away, the more all the members of the state speak the same language, the more intensively can economic, intellectual and political life proceed. And within this method of production is arising the cooperation of the lower classes' intellectual and political life, which means additional strength to every nation. In a national state both these tendencies combine and strengthen one another. In a state of various nationalities they come into hostile collision with each other, and have a paralysing effect on the economic and political process, all the stronger as development progresses.²⁹¹¹³

The nation-state is here made not only the present which the workers' movement has to face, but also the necessary future of humanity.

We have already seen the underlying problem with this approach. Capitalism is from the beginning an *international* social formation, and the nation-state is, in relation to the world market, merely a firm. The state-firm retains liquidity by borrowing on financial markets. These, if they are national in form, are international in substance: this was already true of the 17th century Amsterdam and 18th century London financial markets. An attempt in a single country to break with capitalist rule - or even to significantly improve the position of the working class - will thus be met with withdrawal of credit by the capitalists, leading to an immediate crisis of state liquidity and more general economic dislocation.

If a socialist government responds by expropriations, the immediate effect is to break the incentive structure of the capitalist market in the country and *increase* economic dislocation. In addition, the response of international capital will then take the form of blockade and war. It thus becomes immediately necessary to move to generalised planning under economic autarky. This was the situation of the Bolsheviks in 1918-19; it has been repeated with varying results - usually the collapse of the socialist government - many times since.

The result is, in fact - as it was in the former tsarist empire - economic *regression*. Hence the socialist party loses its majority support and is forced - if it is to continue its course - to minority dictatorship and increasingly systematic repression. In countries that are not self-sufficient in food, energy and raw materials - ie, most

advanced capitalist countries - the result would be mass starvation. The socialist government would collapse into a capitalist government far more rapidly than happened in Russia and China.

The exception that proves the rule is the outcome of World War II, the effects of which stretched down to the 1980s. The deep *global* crisis of British world hegemony, culminating in World War II, and the particular form which that war took, yielded the result that the USSR was massively strengthened while remaining under bureaucratic rule. In the ensuing 'cold war' there could appear to be a series of 'national revolutions'. But in reality these were possible because the countries involved (most clearly Cuba) were *brought into and subsidised by* the autarkic, bureaucratic 'planning' system of the Soviet regime. Equally, the US, now hegemonic over the capitalist countries, *consciously encouraged* social democratic and nationalist reform in capital's front-line states as an instrument to secure them from being added to the 'Soviet empire': part of the policy of 'containment'.

The offensive of the working class in the late 1960s and early 1970s destroyed the policy of containment and led the US to turn to a global policy of aggressive 'roll-back of communism' under the banner of 'human rights'. The fall of the USSR has finally destroyed the foundations of the policy of concessions for the sake of containment. The exception is now over. It still proves the rule because it was *international* events and dynamics - World War II and the cold war - that enabled the supposedly 'national' revolutions and reforms. Capitalism is an *international* system and it is *international* events and movements that enable radical change in individual nation-states.

The importance of symbolic unity

The Second International offered mainly *symbolic* unity of the international workers' movement. But this symbolic unity was profoundly important to the development of workers' parties in the individual countries.

This point is clearest at the fringes. In Britain and the US, May Day became, in the 1890s, the focus of the early stages of development

of class *political* consciousness after the later 19th century slough of 'pure trade unionism'; and in the early 20th century the connection to the Second International pushed the more advanced trade unionists towards politics, and the socialist groups towards unity.

Similarly, relations to the *international* movement pushed the French, Italian and Russian socialist groups towards unity in a single party, actively encouraged by the Kautskyan leadership; and the single party then advanced class political consciousness at a level that the divided socialist groups could not. There are no doubt other examples.

In fact, the same is true in Germany itself. In 1875 Liebknecht wrote a 'Lassallean' programme for Gotha, perhaps imagining that this was necessary to achieve unity. In reality, the Lassallean General Association of German Workers was desperate for unity and would have accepted it on any terms. It had been losing ground to the 'Marxist' Eisenachers because of its hostility to broad trade unions, its dictatorial internal regime and the Eisenachers' clear opposition to the imperial state, which had been expressed by their MPs' refusal to vote for war credits in 1870.¹¹⁴ The Eisenachers' roughly democratic character, support for trade unions and internationalism were all legacies of the First International.

The working class is an international class. It can only attain full political consciousness of its character as a class - become a class 'for itself' - if this character is expressed in international unity of the workers' class movement. The symbolic unity offered by the Second International was less than was needed for the proletariat to take power, but still *necessary* for the proletariat to get as far as it got in the run-up to 1914.

We can see the same phenomenon in the fate of communist and Trotskyist parties/groups after the dissolution of the Comintern. The allegiance of the 'tankies' to the USSR and its leadership was a deformed and bastardised internationalism, but it was a form of internationalism nonetheless. The Eurocommunists, as they lost their internationalism, also lost their ability to promote any sort of class politics and became, if anything, *more* liberal than the social-democrats.

Among the Trotskyists, in the split of 1953 the 'Pabloite' ISFI

prioritised the unity of the international movement, while the ‘anti-Pabloite’ ICFI prioritised the organisational independence of their national parties. The result was that the ISFI and its successors remained more open and democratic than the successors of the ICFI, which universally wound up creating Stalinist internal regimes and Cominform round their national ‘parties’. As the ISFI’s successors in the 1980s began to theorise the idea that only the sovereign national parties, not the ‘international’, should act as parties, they also moved more generally towards Eurocommunist non-class politics.

Even in distorted forms, then, the struggle for international unity of the working class and the struggle for working class political independence stand and fall together.

The Russian question

If the policy of the Second International was fundamentally one of separate national revolutions, there was an undercurrent that suggested a repeat of 1848. This was expressed in Marx and Engels’ responses to the Russian *Narodnaya Volya*, and became current among Russian Marxists - most explicitly in Trotsky’s *Results and prospects*, but also in Lenin’s *Two tactics*. The idea was that the fall of the tsarist regime would rapidly trigger a European-wide workers’ revolution - an 1848 on a higher level.

This was a view held by Marx and Engels at the time of the Crimean War, and the correspondence with the Narodniks and Russian prefaces to the *Manifesto* revived it. It was, in fact, a reasonable but mistaken response to the defeat of 1848. Russian intervention had played an important part in defeats in Poland and Hungary, and the tsarist regime was one of the principal guarantors of the European regime of the Congress of Vienna and the Holy Alliance that backed it. Knocking Russia out of the picture should, therefore, let loose the national-democratic movements in central Europe (Poland, Hungary, etc). This would bring down the Austro-Hungarian and German regimes and trigger European-wide revolutionary aspirations in the style of 1848.

It was a mistake because 1815 was fundamentally a *British*-sponsored settlement placing a pressure-lid on continental politics for

the benefit of Britain. True, the tsar, the king of Prussia and the emperor of Austria had provided most of the soldiers to defeat France; but the money that funded their armies had been raised and mobilised through London at the behest of the British government.

The 1847 economic crisis led to the British-imposed lid being blown off all across Europe in a revolutionary explosion. The primary change that ensued - the regime of Louis Napoleon in France - freed French capital from the British-imposed chains of 1815, so that the French state could begin to compete on the military-international level with Britain.

As a result, in the ensuing period Germany and Italy were driven towards unification in order to emulate France, and governments began to use (or returned to using) war and imperialism as a means to bleed off the internal contradictions of domestic politics and economics. Hence after the Crimean war, the idea that the tsarist regime in any strong sense guaranteed European political stability or was the policeman of Europe was illusory.

In 1914-18 the point was emphatically demonstrated. Far from the Russian Revolution triggering the European revolution, the European war triggered the Russian Revolution. The central European national movements then proved to be a bulwark first of German, then of Entente, policy *against* the Russian Revolution. The Russian Revolution did, at one remove, trigger revolutionary movements in Hungary, Germany and Italy. It did so not by the route envisaged by Marx and Engels, that the removal of fear of Russian intervention in central Europe would open the way to a revolutionary movement which would spill westwards. Nor did it do so by the route projected by Trotsky in *Results and Prospects*, that the Russian Revolution would spill over into Germany and/or trigger a collapse of the London and Paris financial markets. Rather, the perception of the revolution as a workers' revolution triggered an international radicalisation of the workers' movement. This radicalisation reached its highest points in the countries which could not see themselves as victors in the war: Germany, Austria-Hungary and (in a slightly different way) Italy. Advanced workers in these countries saw a *possibility* of workers' revolution as a result of 1917. They could see

this possibility because of the prior symbolic international unity of the workers' movement in the form of the pre-war Second International.

At first, October 1917 seemed to show that the working class *could* take power. This image promoted revolutionary attempts elsewhere. But the impulse rapidly ebbed. As disturbing news began to filter west, even Luxemburg, in prison, was hesitant. As the character of the Soviet regime was rendered more explicit in the theses of the 1920 and 1921 Comintern Congresses, the ban on factions and the Kronstadt events, the majority of the existing militant left activists of the workers' movement in western Europe took their distance from the Bolsheviks. This was reflected in the 1921 splits from the Comintern of *both* the larger part of those among the left of the Kautskyan centre who had flirted with it, *and* the 'left communists' (larger then than they later became).

These splits foreshadowed the future: the nature of the Soviet regime was to become a primary political obstacle to any attempt of the working class to take power into its own hands in western Europe, and ultimately to international class-political consciousness more generally.

The image of an international chain of national revolutions starting with Russia was, nonetheless, to be the governing idea of Comintern international strategy and, after it, that of the Trotskyists.

Comintern and the Trotskyists

The idea that became the Communist International began, as we have already seen in chapter four, with the anti-war wing of the Second International and with Lenin's and Zinoviev's struggle within this left for an international split. Comintern was able to emerge because of the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in October 1917 and the survival of the revolutionary regime into 1919, when the 1st Congress of Comintern met.

The result was that Comintern had a double character. On the one hand, it was an International of the anti-war left, attempting to redeem the honour of socialism after the ignominious political collapse of the Second International. On the other, it was a fan club for the Russian Revolution and its leaders.

The fan-club aspect became more prominent with the defeat of the Hungarian and (especially) the German and Italian revolutionary movements. On the one hand, the Russians had the prestige of victory and the material resources of state power. On the other, the Germans had lost some of their most eminent leaders - and the westerners in general had failed where the Russians had succeeded. It was natural for Comintern in these circumstances to become a body that propagated the idea of the Russian Revolution as a universal model.

In international strategy, this had two aspects. The first was that defence of the Soviet regime was the central touchstone of the communist parties' internationalism. The idea that it might be appropriate to admit the defeat of a *proletarian socialist* policy in the face of the defeat of the western revolutionary movements of 1919-20 and of peasant resistance in Russia, and carry out a controlled retreat to capitalism, was literally unthinkable to Comintern.

Whether such a retreat was a possible option is doubtful; but the inability of the communist parties to think it probably contributed to the fact that the degeneration of the Soviet regime into open tyranny brought the communist parties down with it. It also produced among the Trotskyists a bizarre body of competing theological dogmas about the Stalinist regime that provided ideology for the Trotskyists' endless splits.

Back to separate national revolutions

The second aspect was a political retreat to the idea of a series of discrete national revolutions. This was a retreat in the first place because, as we saw in chapter four, Lenin's and Zinoviev's policy of dual defeatism supposed a struggle by an organised international movement to bring down the belligerent states *simultaneously*.

It was a retreat secondly because it was quite clear to the Russian leadership that the proletariat could not hope to hold power in Russia for long - how long was uncertain - unless the western workers' movement came to their aid. October 1917 was thus a gamble on the German revolution. By 1919, with German social-democracy in the saddle, this gamble had failed; it was only gradually that the possibility of 'hanging on and waiting for the Germans' for a

year or two was transmuted into the idea of a prolonged period of isolation of the Soviet regime, and from there in turn into 'socialism in one country'.

In the third place, Comintern at the outset and down to 1921 expected a generalised European civil war in the short term, and in the civil war in Russia and the 1920 invasion of Poland the Russian CP had been willing to ride roughshod over national self-determination to carry the arms of the Red Army to the borders of the former tsarist empire. In 1920 they hoped to carry them to the eastern border of Germany, ready to intervene if the German communists could provide the *casus belli*.¹¹⁵ Only military defeat held them back here (and in Finland and the Baltic).

By 1921 this policy was effectively over. This fact was signalled both by the retreat in Russia represented by the New Economic Policy, and the turn to the struggle to 'win the masses' urged on the communist parties at the 3rd Congress.

'Do what the Russians did'

The shift into a policy of separate national revolutions - even if these might turn out to be close together in time - carried with it an *increased* emphasis on copying the Russian Revolution. The struggle for soviets; intervention in the bourgeois parliaments; the struggle to win the trade unions; the worker-farmer alliance; 'Bolshevising' the organisational norms of communist parties; the united front; the workers' government; the policy of the right of the self-determination of nations; and what became 'transitional demands'. All these were justified primarily on the basis that they were validated by the victory of the Russian Revolution, and only secondarily (and sketchily) on more general, theoretical grounds. There was only one example of a successful revolution - Russia - and socialists everywhere had to copy it.

If it were not for the immediate context of defeats in Hungary, Germany and Italy, and the general belief that revolutionary crisis and civil war were on the agenda in the immediate term in the west, this claim would have been utterly extraordinary. Russia was a country in which the proletariat was a small minority. Communications in the Russian countryside were highly patchy, and in many areas the

technology in use in agriculture and the density of market towns was more comparable to the west European 12th century than to the 16th (let alone the early 20th).

Trade unions and political parties alike had existed in Russia before the revolution illegally and on a small scale. The German Reichstag had limited powers, but looked *more or less* like a French or Italian chamber of deputies; the Russian duma was far more limited. There was little reason to suppose that the tactics that had brought down the fragile and not very democratic regime of the 1917 provisional governments and the shallowly rooted Kadet, Menshevik and Social Revolutionary parties would work on the far more deeply entrenched and experienced political parties of western Europe, the US or even Latin America.

Imitating the Russians was not utterly disastrous, in the same way attempts to imitate the Maoists in more developed countries were in the 1960s and 1970s. This is attributable to the fact that *most* of what the Russians endeavoured to teach the Comintern in 1920-23 was in fact orthodox Kautskyism, which the Russians had learned from the German SPD. But there were exceptions. The worker-peasant alliance was utterly meaningless in the politics of the western communist parties before 1940, and after 1945 was a force for conservatism, as the European bourgeoisies turned to subsidising agriculture.

The ‘Bolshevisation’ of the communist parties, and the savage polemics against Kautsky and others over “classless democracy”, which became part of the common inheritance of ‘official communism’, Maoism and Trotskyism, deeply deformed these movements. In the end, the Bonapartist-centralised dictatorship of the party bureaucracy produced kleptocrats in the USSR and the countries that copied it. In the western communist parties and the trade unions associated with them, it produced ordinary labour bureaucrats with more power to quash dissent than the old socialist bureaucracy had deployed (a feature gratefully copied by the social democratic right). In the Trotskyist and Maoist groups it produced petty patriarchs and tinpot dictators whose interests in holding onto their jobs and petty power were an effective obstacle to unity. It thus

turned out to be in the interests of ... the capitalist class.

Moreover, casting out “the renegade Kautsky” cut off the communists from the western European roots of their politics. Lenin and his co-thinkers’ transmission of the inheritance of the Second International into Russian politics became Lenin’s unique genius on the party question, feeding into the cult of the personality of Lenin (and its successors ...). Perfectly ordinary western socialist political divisions, pre-existing the split in the Second International, had to be cast in Russian terms. Communists began to speak a language alien to their broader audiences, the language that has descended into today’s Trot-speak.

The ‘general staff of world revolution’

Trotsky described Comintern as the “political general staff of the world revolution”, and the phrase to some extent stuck.¹¹⁶

The idea of a ‘general staff’ was, in fact, taken from the German imperial armed forces: the Prussian *Grosser Generalstab* had been the first such institution, and the imperial version had conducted the strategic planning that was put into effect in 1914. It carried with it a very centralised concept of command: the imperial general staff to a considerable extent micro-managed the particular fronts. In the latter part of World War I the imperial general staff headed by Hindenburg and Ludendorff became the effective government of Germany.

This background in Prussian military thought carried with it a willingness in Comintern’s leadership to micro-manage the national parties. At the very beginning of the Comintern, the Russians pressed their closest German co-thinkers for an early split with the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), a decision the German leaders regretted. The ECCI had no hesitation in issuing instructions to the French Communist Party (PCF) about, for example, the composition of its leadership and the reorganisation of its Seine federation, and pressed the German Communist Party (KPD) in 1923 to make military preparations for an insurrection.¹¹⁷

So far this point is familiar from the Eurocommunists’ and their followers’ attacks on Comintern and on Trotskyism. It is important, however, to be clear that the “general staff of world revolution” was

not simply ‘wrong’.

If it *had* been the case that Europe was on the verge of generalised civil war, the creation of a European-wide military command structure capable of giving orders to the national movements would have been entirely justified. In war that is to go beyond guerrilla harassment of the enemy to take and hold territory, it is necessary to have a centralised command. It is also sometimes necessary for units to sacrifice themselves in diversionary attacks that will enable victory elsewhere (or, for that matter, in attacks that will lead to breakthroughs by attrition).

It *might* thus have been justified to wager the KPD on the possibility that a breakthrough in Germany would bring down the whole European state system. Trotsky certainly went on thinking so for the rest of his life, blaming the KPD leadership for fumbling the crises of 1923.

There were two underlying problems. The first is that “war is the continuation of politics *by other means*” (Clausewitz).¹¹⁸ War is not reducible to politics, nor politics to war. Creating a top-down military command structure in the Russian Communist Party, Comintern and the other communist parties tended to eliminate or subordinate the local and sectoral mediations that link a workers’ party to its broader working class constituency and feed back on the centre the political ideas and mood current in this constituency. It thus reduced both the communist parties’ and the Comintern’s ability to form the *political* judgments that necessarily underlie decisions for military action.

Second, the communists were nowhere near having political majority support in Europe or even in Germany. The task of the communists once the revolutionary wave of 1919-20 had ebbed was - as Comintern recognised at the 3rd and 4th Congresses - to win a political majority. It was not to launch a civil war. A “general staff of world revolution” was therefore inappropriate.

The military-centralist character of Comintern had the practical effect of making the leaderships of the communist parties dependent on the Comintern centre in Moscow. This took the form of material dependence in the case of the small communist parties - such as the

CPGB - which received subsidies from Moscow, and equally in those parties that were illegal, so that the party leadership was located in Moscow.

But it was equally present in the stronger communist parties such as the KPD and PCF. The 'democratic centralist' character of Comintern - within the terms of the 1920-21 idea of 'democratic centralism' - had the effect that the leaders of these parties were answerable to and removable by the Comintern centre. They could not *both* be in this position *and* be answerable to and removable by their own membership.

The problem was accentuated by the fact that the relation to the Comintern centre in Moscow was necessarily clandestine. In the first place, if the KPD (or the CPGB) *openly* took orders from Moscow, prosecution could follow, all the more if (as in Germany in 1923) the orders were to prepare for and launch an insurrection. Second, *because* it was based in Moscow, the Comintern centre lacked the sort of legitimacy that had been possessed by the general council of the First International or by the congresses of the Second. It was all too easy to accuse it of being merely an instrument of the Russian state.

Clandestinity meant secrecy, and secrecy meant that the members had even less chance of holding the leaders to account than would have been the case if there had been open and transparent subordination of the leaderships of the communist parties to the international centre. There was no chance, in this regime, of the western communist parties resisting the development of open bureaucratic tyranny in the USSR and the accompanying degeneration of Comintern.

In 1919-20 there was a West European Bureau of the Comintern, based in Amsterdam. It turned out that the Left Communists had a majority, and their split brought it to an end. The bureau was overlapped with and was succeeded by an equally short-lived Western European Secretariat, based in Berlin, involving (at least) Radek and Levi. A Central European Secretariat was slightly more long-lasting.

The short life of these organisations reflected the fact that the

military or Bonapartist character of the centralism of 1921 was counterposed to them. Horizontal connections between neighbouring parties, and sub-centres, would inevitably compromise the pure centralism of the International. There were to be the national parties and the international centre.

This structural form reinforced the idea of separate national revolutions. Formal horizontal collaboration might identify concrete common political features, or common tasks. The same would be true of intermediary levels of organisation, such as European (or, by analogy, Latin American, or Pan-African) conferences and leading committees. Within national parties such intermediary structures are common, although bureaucratic centralism tends to close them down or turn them into mere transmission belts for the centre. Channelling everything through Moscow had the effect, in contrast, that there could only be national tasks and global tasks - and global tasks were defined by the view from Moscow.

Trotsky's call for the Fourth International

This background character of Comintern helps to explain the peculiar character of Trotsky's decision in 1933 to denounce it as dead for the purposes of world revolution and call for a new, fourth, International. The peculiarity of this decision is the fact that Trotsky denounced the Third International on the basis of events in a *single* country (Germany).

The First International had been founded on the explicit basis of the international tasks of the proletariat as a class; the Second, more indefinitely, on the basis of the international common character of the proletariat's interests and struggles. The Third, at least formally, had been founded on the failure of the Second in World War I. To denounce the Comintern and call for a new international on the basis of a defeat in a single country was therefore something quite new - even if the country, Germany, had been the historical centre of the Second International and home to one of the strongest communist parties.

Trotsky seems to have imagined that the Comintern would be defined for ever by the disaster in Germany, as the Second

International was defined for ever by August 1914. The choice to support the existing states in war did indeed turn out to be a permanent choice that defines Labourite and socialist parties to this day.

But 1933 was not comparable to August 1914. By 1935 the Comintern had abandoned the sectarian ‘third period’ politics that led to the disaster of 1933 and turned to the people’s front policy.¹¹⁹ In spite of a brief return to the ‘third period’ during the Hitler-Stalin pact in 1939-41, the people’s front was to be the main strategic line of ‘official communism’ permanently (and still is today). The ‘third period’ and its role in the disaster in Germany has become a matter of interest to historians and Trotskyists.

The 1933 call for a Fourth International was therefore plainly premature. It was only with the people’s front turn, as the communists more and more plainly abandoned both working class political independence and criticism of the social democrats, that the Trotskyists’ project began to win broader support. Even then, the growth was limited: the ‘Fourth International’ founded in 1938 could account for about 7,500 organised militants worldwide.¹²⁰

Part of the explanation for Trotsky’s premature call for the Fourth International is that - as can be seen from his writings in the 1930s - he had become fully convinced that Lenin was right and he was wrong between 1903 and 1917. He was therefore determined *not* to do anything that could amount to conciliationism or postponing the necessary struggle to create a new party and a new international.

Cominternism

There is, however, another and in some ways more fundamental aspect. Trotsky’s conception both of the International Left Opposition (ILO), formed in 1930, and of the projected Fourth International, was that they were to be a revival and continuation of the Comintern of 1919-23. The documents of the first four congresses of the Comintern were part of the ILO’s platform and of its successor’s, the International Communist League.

This unavoidably meant that the ILO, ICL and ‘Fourth International’ carried in their roots the ideas of a chain of national revolutions (starting, now, perhaps somewhere other than in Russia)

and of an international whose tasks were mainly to create parties of the ‘Bolshevik type’ in every country. On the one hand, this meant that defeats and disasters *in single countries* formed the real basis of the critique of the Comintern - and of the critique of those, such as the Spanish POUM and French PSOP, with whom the Trotskyists broke on the road to the ‘Fourth International’.

On the other, the idea of tasks of the International *as such* in constructing *international unity of the working class in action* had no strategic ground in the Trotskyists’ ideas. A tiny group, of course, could do little practical along these lines. But the ‘Fourth International’ was bound to appear as a micro-miniature Comintern with a leftist version of Comintern strategy.

The ‘Fourth International’ also inherited from the Third the utter centrality of the defence of the Russian Revolution and hence of the USSR in wars with capitalist states to its identity and programme . In 1939-40 this position was to split it down the middle over the Russo-Finnish war and the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland, with Trotsky insisting that the minority (in the US and elsewhere) should not have the right to express its views in public. The minority took a third of the membership of the US Socialist Workers Party, the largest group represented at the 1938 congress, and half of the ‘international executive committee’ elected at that congress.

Bureaucratic centralism

The refusal to accept public factions in 1940 was in contradiction with the Trotskyists’ own history. The Trotskyist movement had originated in the 1920s as an illegal public faction of the Russian Communist Party, and the ILO launched in 1930 had been an illegal public faction of Comintern. The Russian oppositions, indeed, had had as part of their core politics a critique of bureaucratism, albeit one that was cautious and imperfectly articulate.

Part of this critique survived in the culture Trotsky sought to create in the ILO and ICL. The 1933 resolution, ‘The International Left Opposition, its tasks and methods’, said that: “The foundation of party democracy is timely and complete *information*, available to all members of the organisation and covering all the important

questions of their life and struggle. *Discipline* can be built up only on a conscious assimilation of the policies of the organisation by all its members and on confidence in the leadership. Such confidence can be won only gradually, in the course of common struggle and reciprocal influence ...

“The frequent practical objections, based on the ‘loss of time’ in abiding by democratic methods, amount to short-sighted opportunism. The education and consolidation of the organisation is a most important task. Neither time nor effort should be spared for its fulfilment. Moreover, party democracy, as the only conceivable guarantee against unprincipled conflicts and unmotivated splits, in the last analysis does not increase the overhead costs of development, but reduces them. Only through constant and conscientious adherence to the methods of democracy can the leadership undertake important steps on its own responsibility in truly emergency cases without provoking disorganisation or dissatisfaction.”¹²¹

These statements are a standing rebuke to the post-war Trotskyists.

The aspirations of the 1933 resolution were at least partly reflected in the conduct of the international secretariats of the ILO and ICL and in Trotsky’s correspondence.

The secretariats were willing to accept partial splits and public fights in the sections, and Trotsky urged the creation of horizontal relations between the sections (ie, that their debates should be carried into the other sections) as well as vertical section-secretariat relations.¹²²

However, Trotsky’s response to the 1939-40 minority that rejected Soviet-defencism was bureaucratic centralist, and it drew on the idea of splits as purging and proletarianising the movement that had been initiated in the split in the Second International, as we saw in chapter five.

Trotsky was assassinated in 1940. His writings on the US 1939-40 split thus left, as his last legacy to the post-war Trotskyists, *bureaucratic* centralism and the idea of the ‘proletarianising’ and ‘purging’ split.

Two, three, many internationals

In the world between the opening of the cold war in 1948, and the beginning of the open political crisis of the USSR in the 1980s, ‘official communism’ *appeared to be* a strategic way forward for the global working class, and apolitical trade unionism and social democratic coalitionism *appeared to be* a strategic way forward for the working class in the imperialist countries.

Although Comintern had been wound up in 1943, the ‘official communists’ had a form of international, the Cominform: the CPSU had discovered that a ‘consultative’ international secured freedom from accountability as effectively as an open bureaucratic dictatorship and with fewer overhead costs.

This situation posed to the Trotskyists the question: what was their international *for*? In 1953, they split between the majority ‘Pabloite’ advocates of a tactic of large-scale fraction work in the communist parties, and their ‘anti-Pabloite’ opponents, who insisted on building parties organisationally separate from the ‘official communists’ among the milieux of the French socialists, British Bevanites and Rooseveltian Democrat trade unionists.

The split was characterised by bureaucratic centralism on both sides, as first the international executive committee expelled the majority of the French section, and then the US SWP and British section expelled minorities in their organisations that supported the ‘Pabloite’ international majority.

The minority formed an ‘international committee’, but turned out to be unable to produce anything more than occasional liaison meetings between the French, British and US full-timers. In due course the national components went their separate ways, with the usual round of expulsions. Each created an openly bureaucratic centralist ‘Trotintern’, or a formally ‘consultative’ ‘Trotinform’, with its own party in the role of the CPSU.

This was the legacy of Comintern’s ‘chain of revolutions’ idea and the ‘leading role’ in Comintern of the ‘most advanced’ party, with the American, British and French each imagining that they were the ‘most advanced’.

The ‘Pabloites’ (after 1960, the Mandelites) did a little better:

they preserved the *forms* of an international organisation with centre, leadership, international congresses and press, and a degree of internal democracy in their organisation. In the early 1970s, they even began to develop continental perspectives and centres, and horizontal relations between sections. But if you asked them what their international was *for*, the only answer they could give was to be a “centre where the *international* experiences of the mass movement and of the revolution are progressively assimilated”.¹²³

At the end of the day this is to say no more than the Fourth International must exist because it must. Their international had become the Mandelites’ sectarian shibboleth, which distinguished them from their Trotskyist competitors in individual countries.

The insistence of the Mandelites that no-one could be a Trotskyist without the Fourth International pressed the national groups (even quite large ones such as the French Lutte Ouvrière, British Militant and SWP) to create their own. The 1953 split and - all the more - the 1971 split between the British and French anti-Pabloites had the effect of legitimising multiple ‘internationals’ among Trotskyists. At this point we have arrived at today’s world of Trotskyist sect ‘internationals’, although the full baroque elaboration was not to arrive until the 1980s.

The ‘Trothinforms’ are, like the Cominform, *just as much* creatures of bureaucratic centralism as Comintern and the ‘Fourth International’ in its most centralist period. For example, the British SWP’s International Socialist Tendency is not formally ‘democratic centralist’ (ie, bureaucratic-centralist), but this ‘tendency’ can nonetheless expel the US International Socialist Organization for ... supporting a minority faction in Greece in 2003.¹²⁴

Fight for an international

The need for an international is posed because the working class has concrete, immediate, practical international tasks. These are tasks of class solidarity - because the bourgeoisie uses national divisions in the working class to defeat strikes, etc. They are also tasks of formulating an independent class perspective on world affairs. These were the lessons of the First International.

The need for an international is also posed because the working class can only really understand its own strength and become conscious of itself as a 'class for itself', by becoming conscious of itself as an *international class*. This was the lesson of the symbolic role of the Second International.

In the third place, the need for an international is posed because the working class cannot take power in a single country and wait for the proletariat of other countries to come to its aid. This is the fundamental lesson of the degeneration and collapse of Comintern and the eventual fall of the 'socialist countries'. It was a lesson that was not learned by the Trotskyists.

The strategic task that this lesson poses for an international is an internationally united struggle of the working class for political power.

It should be apparent that the objective political conditions do not yet exist for such a struggle. But they do exist for *continental* united struggles for political power, which fight for continental unification: a Communist Party of Europe, a Pan-African Communist Party, and so on. A dynamic towards the continental unification of politics is already visible in bourgeois politics, not just in Europe, and in the Latin American Chávista 'Bolivarians'. It is even present in an utterly deformed and reactionary manner in the islamist movement in the Middle East.

Comintern was not sterilised by the decision to split from the social democrats. It was sterilised by bureaucratic centralism, the idea of a chain of national revolutions and the idea of Comintern as a fan club for the Russians. Its failure was about the inability of Comintern to think of international tasks except either as immediate civil war, which called for a general staff, or making the national communist parties copy the Russians as the road to victory in a single country.

The Trotskyists' 1933 call for a new international was premature. But it was not this premature split that turned their project into a swarm of malignant international sects. Rather it was their too great *faithfulness* to the ideas of the early Comintern, which committed them to the same bureaucratic centralism and the same idea of a chain of national revolutions. This in turn produced the 'anti-

Pabloite' 'Trotinterns' and 'Trotinforms' on the one hand, and the Mandelite empty form of an international without political tasks on the other.

The struggle for an international is a present, concrete task of communists. It is clear, however, that this struggle cannot be carried on by creating yet another micro-'international'. It has to be carried on by fighting, on every occasion that allows, against bureaucratic centralism and the nationalism that goes hand in hand with it, and *for* the concrete tasks of an international: the global struggle for solidarity in the immediate class struggle, for the symbolic unity of the working class as an international class; and the continental struggle for working class political unification and political power.

9

Republican democracy and revolutionary patience

I began this book with the argument that it was necessary to go back over the strategic debates of the past in order to go forward and effectively address strategy now. The primary focus of the book has been to attempt to understand *critically* the various strategic choices made by socialists between 150 and 80 years ago, rather than echoing *uncritically* one or another side of the old debates, as often occurs with the left today. It is necessary to follow the former course because those choices have led up to the defeats, demoralisation and disorientation that currently affects the socialist movement internationally.

They are also, in reality, live political choices today. This has been reflected throughout the book. The fundamental choice between the perspective of the self-emancipation of the working class or, alternatively, forms of utopian or ethical socialism, was posed openly in the 2006 strategy debate in the LCR by the arguments of Artous and Durand. It is posed in British politics - and elsewhere - by both Eurocommunism and 'green socialism'.

The coalitionist policy of the right wing of the Second International has been, since 1945, the policy of Second International socialists and 'official communists' alike. The substantive difference between them, before first Eurocommunism and then the fall of the USSR, was that 'official communists' proposed for each country a socialist-liberal coalition *that would commit to geopolitical formal neutrality combined with friendly relations with the Soviet bloc* (a policy sometimes called 'Finlandisation' by the parties of the right).

With the Soviet sheet anchor gone, the majority of the former ‘official communists’ are at best disoriented, and at worst form the *right wing* of governing coalitions (as is the case with the ex-communists and ex-fellow-travellers within the Labour Party in Britain).

Mass-strike strategy

The Bakuninist general-strike strategy descended into the ‘mass-strike’ strategy of the left wing of the Second International. The direct inheritors of this policy are today’s collectivist anarchists and advocates of ‘direct action’ and ‘movementism’. But its indirect inheritors are the Trotskyists. The Trotskyist idea of a ‘transitional method’ is that consciousness must change “in struggle” on the basis of “present consciousness”.

Trotskyists imagine that partial, trade union, etc struggles can be led into a generalised challenge to the capitalist state, and *in the course of that challenge* the Trotskyists could guide the movement to the seizure of power in the form of ‘All power to the soviets’ - in spite of their marginal numbers *before* the crisis breaks out. Taken together with the Trotskyists’ extreme bureaucratic centralism and various secretive and frontist tactics, this policy amounts almost exactly to the policy of Bakunin and the Bakuninists in 1870-73.

It has had almost as little success as the Bakuninists’ projects. Before 1991, the Trotskyists could more or less plausibly account for this failure by the dominance in the global workers’ movement of the Soviet bureaucracy and hence of ‘official communism’. Since 1991, the global political collapse of the latter has left the Trotskyists without this excuse. Without the Soviet Union and ‘official communism’ to their right, the Trotskyists have proved to be politically rudderless.

To say this is not to reject in principle mass strikes - or one-day general strikes or even insurrectionary general strikes. The point is that these *tactics*, which may be appropriate under various conditions, do not amount to a *strategy* for workers’ power and socialism. Socialists should certainly not oppose spontaneous movements of this sort that may arise in the course of the class struggle, but rather fight within them - as Jack Conrad’s 2006 *Weekly Worker* series on the 1926 general strike explains - for a *political* alternative to the current

capitalist regime.¹²⁵

Kautskyism

Chapter three, on the strategy of the Kautskyan centre, may appear at first to be merely historical. After all, the Kautskyan centre - after its reunification with the right in 1923 - collapsed into the coalitionist right; and after fascism in Italy, Nazism in Germany and 1939-45, it left behind virtually no trace in the parties of the Socialist International.

However, this was not the end of the story. In the first place, much of 'Kautskyism' was reflected in the more constructive part of the politics of the Comintern - and from there, in a more limited way, in the more constructive part of the politics of Trotskyism.

Second, although the post-war 'official communist' parties were coalitionist in their political aspirations, their attachment to the USSR meant that the socialist parties and the left bourgeois parties generally refused to enter 'left coalitions' with them. The result was that the communist parties were forced in practice to act as (rather less democratic) Kautskyan parties. In doing so, they could promote a sort of class-political consciousness and a sort of internationalism, and this could provide a considerable strengthening of the workers' movement.

In this sense 'Kautskyism' means the struggle for an independent workers' party, intimately linked to independent workers' media, trade unions, cooperatives and so on, and for - at least symbolic - internationalism. It also means the struggle against the ideas of short cuts to power that evade the problem of winning a majority, through either coalitionism or 'conning the working class into taking power' via the mass strike. These are *positive* lessons for today's left.

But there are negative lessons too. The Kautskyans fostered the illusion of taking hold of and using the existing bureaucratic-coercive state. They turned the idea of the democratic republic - in the hands of Marx and Engels the immediate *alternative* to this state - into a synonym for 'rule of law' constitutionalism. The national horizons of their strategy helped support the feeding of the working class into the mincing machine of war; and so did their belief that unity in a single party was indispensable, even if it came at the price

of giving the coalitionist right wing a veto.

The statist, 'rule of law' and nationalist commitments shared by the Kautskyan centre and the coalitionist right meant that they collapsed ignominiously in the face of Italian fascism and German Nazism. This lesson has been repeated over and over again in the colonial 'third world'. In the imperialist countries, since the first impulse of the post-war settlement began to fade, the electoral cycle has repeatedly produced weaker reformist governments that end in disillusionment, the temporary rise of the far right and the victory of further centre-right governments.

These, too, are live political issues at the present date. The large majority of the existing left uses nationalist arguments and seeks to take hold of and use the existing bureaucratic-coercive state machinery.

The idea that unity of the 'broad movement' is essential, even if this means that the pro-capitalist right wing is given a veto, is the essence of the French Socialist left's decision to stick with the right rather than unify the opponents of the EU constitutional treaty, and of Rifondazione's 2006 decision to go into Prodi's *Unione* government in Italy. In both cases the results have been clearly disastrous.

Cominternism

The primary inheritors in today's politics of the ideas of the early Comintern are the Trotskyist and ex-Trotskyist organisations. To a lesser extent the same is true of Maoist groups, although since the right turn of Beijing in the 1980s these have become smaller and less influential. Both sets of ideas have a wider influence in diluted form through ex-member 'independents' who have got fed up with the organised groups but not made a systematic critique of their politics.

The main burden of chapters four to eight has been to try and separate out those elements in the ideas of the Comintern that were rational responses to real strategic problems from those that were blind alleys that lent support to the refusal of organised groups and 'independents' alike to unite effectively. This was particularly relevant to defeatism, the party of a new type, and the general staff of world revolution.

The reverse of the coin, in the case of both Trotskyist groups and independents, is the use of ‘united front’ and ‘workers’ government’ slogans to justify diplomatic deals with elements of the ‘official’ (ie, coalitionist and nationalist) left. These almost invariably involve ‘non-sectarian’ sectarianism: ie, sectarianism to their left and opportunism to their right. The phenomenon can be seen in full flower in the SWP. It also informs the LCR majority’s use of ‘united front’ policy to evade the problem of the disunity between the Ligue and Lutte Ouvrière.

The struggle for a united and effective left in the workers’ movement therefore unavoidably involves a struggle for a definite break with the errors of the early Comintern that have been inherited by the Trotskyists, and with the Trotskyists’ own errors in interpreting Comintern materials.

In several countries partial gains have been made by left unity. Partial *willingness to break with bureaucratic centralism* has been the key to both the unity and the gains. In England, the US, France and Argentina this has been absent and no progress has been made - in Argentina in spite of conditions of acute crisis in 2000-01.

At present, however, it seems depressingly likely that the continued coalitionism of the former ‘official communists’ and Maoists, and the Trotskyist diplomatic version of the ‘united front’, will result in these gains coming to nothing. The fate of the Brazilian Workers Party seems a clear example. If this depressing vista comes true, the Trotskyist sects will no doubt say, ‘There you are - told you so’. But - as the failure of the sects in England, the US, France and Argentina shows - the truth will be that there has been an *insufficiently critical* break with the inheritance of the early Comintern.

Strategy

The strategic coordinates that I have positively argued for in the last eight chapters can be summarised as follows:

1. There is no way forward from capitalism other than the self-emancipation of the working class. The ideas of a peasant-led revolution, of a long-term strategic alliance of the proletariat and

peasantry as equals, of ‘advanced social democracy’ or of a ‘broad democratic alliance’ have all been proved false. They have been proved false by the fate of the so-called ‘socialist countries’ and by the fact that the fall of the USSR, combined with the decay of the US-led world economic order, has led to increasing attacks on the concessions that capital made to social democratic and left nationalist governments elsewhere in order to ‘contain communism’. The idea of the ‘movement of movements’ has proved, with extraordinary rapidity, to lead nowhere.

2. The ‘working class’ here means the *whole social class dependent on the wage fund*, including employed and unemployed, unwaged women ‘homemakers’, youth and pensioners. It does not just mean the employed workers, still less the ‘productive’ workers or the workers in industry. This class has the potential to lead society forward beyond capitalism because it is *separated from* the means of production and hence forced to cooperate and organise to defend its interests. This cooperation foreshadows the free *cooperative* appropriation of the means of production that is communism.

3. The self-emancipation of the working class requires the working class to lay its hands collectively on the means of production. This does not mean state ownership of the means of production, which is merely a legal form. Without democratic republicanism, the legal form of state ownership means private ownership by state bureaucrats. It means that the working class *collectively decides how the means of production are used*.

4. The self-emancipation of the working class therefore means in the first place the struggle for the working class to take *political power*. The only form through which the working class can take political power and lay collective hands on the means of production is the democratic republic. This does *not* mean ‘rule of law’ parliamentary constitutionalism, to which it is, in fact, *opposed*. It means a regime in which - *in addition* to the political liberties partially provided by ‘rule of law’ constitutionalism (freedom of speech, assembly, association, movement, etc) and an extension of these liberties - all public officials are elected and recallable; there is universal military training and service and the right to bear arms, and

political rights in the armed forces; generalised trial by jury; freedom of information; and so on.

5. In particular, democratic republicanism implies that what has to be decided centrally for effective common action should be decided centrally, but that what does not have to be decided centrally should be decided locally (or sectorally: rail timetables, for example). Self-government of the localities, not Bonapartist centralism. But equally not constitutional federalism, which hands the ultimate power to the lawyers and turns the rights of the units of the federation into a form of private property.

The reason for points (4) and (5) is, in the first place, that the working class can only organise its cooperation through unity in action on the basis of accepting diversity of opinions; and, second, that there cannot be a *common, cooperative* appropriation of the means of production where there is private ownership of information, of institutional powers or of 'political careers'. Without the principles of democratic republicanism there is precisely private ownership by individuals or groups of information, of institutional powers and of 'political careers'. That is the meaning of the bureaucracies of the former 'socialist countries', of the trade unions, of the socialist and communist parties, and of the Trotskyist sects.

6. Since the only form in which the working class can actually take power is the democratic republic, it is only when this idea wins a majority in the society that the democratic republic can be achieved. Without clear majority support, a democratic republic is self-evidently impossible. All ideas of an enlightened minority conning the working class into taking power, whether through coalitions, through the mass strike or, more generally, through one or another sort of frontist arrangement of the minority party cog driving the bigger wheel (front, soviet, etc), have to be rejected.

7. To say this is not to reject either illegal or forcible action in defence of the immediate interests of the working class. The defensive action of minorities - particular sections of workers taking strike action, refusing to pay rents, organising self-defence against fascist attacks, etc - may appear to be anti-democratic because it is minority action against the wishes of an elected government.

This could be the case *if the state was a democratic republic*. But it is not. In spite of universal suffrage, the state regime is, in fact, oligarchic, corrupt and committed to the interests of the capitalist minority through the ‘rule of law’, deficit financing in the financial markets, and the national-state form in the world market.

To take as good coin the capitalists’ and their states’ hypocritical protestations against illegal or forcible action is merely to disarm the working class, since the capitalists and the state routinely act illegally and make illegal use of force in defence of their interests. The point is to avoid making the use of force or minority action into a strategy - let alone one that attempts to evade the struggle for a majority. We cannot claim to *impose our minimum programme on the society as a whole* through minority action. But *self-defence of workers’ immediate interests* by sections of the class in defiance of a governmental ‘majority’ created by corrupt and fraudulent means is in no sense anti-democratic.

Party

8. The struggle for the working class to take political power involves in the here and now the organisation of a *political party* standing for the independent interests of the working class. This follows from the fact that the class as a class is not the same thing as the particular sections of the class who are in employment. It also follows from the fact that to emancipate itself the working class must take political power and give the lead to society as a whole.

9. Such a political party needs to be democratic-republican in its organisational character, just as much as the form of authority that the working class needs to create in the society as a whole needs to be the democratic republic. That is, it needs the liberties (freedom of speech, etc), freedom of information, elected and recallable officials, and both central decision-making mechanisms *and* self-government of the localities and sectors.

The last point follows in the first place from the point made to explain points (4) and (5): the working class needs the principles of democratic republicanism in order to cooperate, and there can be no real, free cooperation where there is private property in information

and in 'political careers'.

It follows in the second place from a central lesson of the Russian Revolution, repeatedly confirmed elsewhere. It is the *existing party organisations* of the working class that can offer an alternative form of authority to the authority of the bourgeoisie: not the trade unions, and not the improvised organisations of the mass struggle such as soviets. Moreover, all states are party-states, shaped by the parties that created them and excluding the parties that opposed their creation. Hence a bureaucratic centralist party, if it took political power, would inevitably create a bureaucratic centralist state.

10. To do the job of organising the struggle for the self-emancipation of the working class, the workers' party has to be *independent of* the capitalists and of the existing capitalist state. This implies that the working class has to build up its own funds, its own educational and welfare systems and its own media. Dependence on the capitalists and their state for these resources results in inability to speak *against* the capitalists' interests.

It implies also that the workers' party cannot accept responsibility either as a minority in a government with capitalist or pro-capitalist parties or in any government at all that is not committed to the immediate creation of the democratic republic in the interests of the working class.

The underlying reason for this point was explained in chapters two and seven. Capitalist nation-states are firms in the world market, and to defend the interests of the nation-state it is *necessary* to carry on the capitalists' side of the class struggle against the working class.

11. Ideally, this implies that there should be a single workers' party uniting *both* those who believe that the workers' interests can be defended through the existing state regime *and* those who insist on the struggle for the democratic republic, with this difference expressed in the form of public *factions* with their own press, organisation and membership, and complete freedom of criticism. At the crunch moments when it becomes necessary to do so, the working class would then have the ability to choose between these factions.

In practice, however, this is impossible. *Because* the state and the capitalists are on their side, the state loyalists/coalitionists will

always insist on a veto on 'revolutionary' politics. This makes it necessary for those who stand for the working class taking the political power to organise a party separate from the state loyalists/coalitionists.

This, in turn, poses the question of the 'united class front': the struggle for unity in action of *the whole class* around immediate common goals, against the split forced by the loyalist/coalitionist demands for a veto.

International

12. Capitalism is an international system and both the capitalist class and the working class are international classes. The nation-state is merely a firm within the international capitalist system; it is just as much vulnerable to the flight of capital and disinvestment as are individual firms. The working class can therefore only lay collective hands on the means of production and decide democratically on their use *on a world scale*. The first and foremost lesson of the 'short 20th century' is the impossibility of socialism in a single country.

But exactly the same reasons mean that it is impossible to have *political power of the working class* or the democratic republic - for more than a few months - in a single country. The struggle for workers' power is therefore a struggle for a global democratic republic and immediately for continental democratic republics.

There is an important implication of this point: it is strategically necessary - as far as possible - to fight for a majority for working class politics on the international scale *before* attempting to take the power in any single country: taking the power in any single country, unless the workers' party is on the verge of at least a continental majority, is likely to lead to disaster.

13. Further, it is impossible to have full class political consciousness - ie, mass consciousness by the working class of itself as a class and its independent interests - in a single country. *The independent class party of the working class, in the broadest sense, is necessarily an international party*. Indeed, it is increasingly the case that cooperation of the working class in international trade union organisations is essential to defending the immediate interests of workers in the direct class struggle.

14. It is impossible to achieve either the democratic republic or the independent workers' party without rejecting both bureaucratic/Bonapartist centralism and legal federalism. This is true all the more of the struggle for the global or continental democratic republic and those for an international workers' party and international trade unions, etc. This is the fundamental lesson both of Comintern and of the petty caricatures of Comintern that the Trotskyists have made.

What is not said

I have said nothing in this summary about imperialism, although I have written on this issue at length elsewhere. The global hierarchy of nation-states is real, and justifies defeatism in the imperialist countries in relation to their colonial wars. But the primary conclusion from the Leninist theory of imperialism - the 'anti-imperialist united front', which descends to the modern left as Maoism and third-worldism - is shown by the experience of the 20th century to be a blind alley.

I have said nothing about the 'permanent revolution' versus 'stages theory'. Again, a principal lesson of the 20th century is that *both* approaches are blind alleys. In addition, both are strategic approaches to *pre-capitalist* states and countries under global capitalism. There are a few of these left, but not enough to justify treating the issues as fundamental to strategy.

I have said nothing about one of the principal issues that has divided the left: that of Soviet defencism versus third-campism. Views on the class character of the USSR, etc are important to Marxist *theory*. But the fall of the USSR means that this is no longer a question of *strategy*.

In relation to the national question, I have argued that the positive goal of the workers' party should be the *international* - continental and eventually global - democratic republic. The implication of this approach is that slogans about national 'self-determination' have a secondary tactical character.

In relation to 'gender politics' I have argued on the one hand that the self-emancipation of the working class means the self-emancipation of the whole social class dependent on the wage fund. It should be obvious that this is inconceivable without the struggle

for the self-emancipation of women *as part of* this struggle. On the other hand, I have argued that the idea of a united, cross-class, feminist movement as an effective political actor has proved illusory in the course of the last 30 years (chapter one).

‘Reform or revolution’

The Mandeliste Fourth International in general has argued for the creation of parties that are “not programmatically delimited between reform and revolution”. The examples are the Brazilian Workers Party, Rifondazione, the Scottish Socialist Party and so on. Comrade Callinicos, in contrast, argues that the dividing line between ‘reform and revolution’ is still fundamental. His principal conclusion from this is the need for the ‘Leninist’ party, by which he means a bureaucratic-centralist Trotskyist party; with the consequence that *alliances* such as Respect (ie, coalitions and fronts) are all that can be achieved on a broader level.

The burden of the whole book has been that this is an *ideologised* form of a real political divide. The real divide is, on the one side, for or against taking responsibility in a coalition government to run the capitalist state. On the other side, it is for or against the open advocacy of the independent interests of the working class, of the democratic republic and of internationalism (because the loyalists/coalitionists veto this open advocacy).

As I have said before (point 11), there *can* be partial unity around immediate tasks between the partisans of coalitionism/loyalism and those of working class political power and internationalism; but the condition of this unity is open debate and unflinching criticism of the coalitionists/loyalists by an *organised party* or *public faction* of the partisans of working class political power. Otherwise we might as well just join the Labour Party, the French Socialist Party, or whatever as individuals.

The Fourth International is for unity in a *party* that involves at least partial suspension of criticism (‘non-sectarianism’). The SWP is for unity in a *coalition* that equally involves at least partial suspension of criticism. In both cases this is merely to give political support to loyalism/coalitionism. The SWP’s difference from the

Fourth International therefore reduces to the organisational separation of the ‘Leninist’ - ie, bureaucratic-centralist - party, *without this party having tasks of overt criticism of the coalitionists among its current allies*. This is merely to be a sect.

The ideological form is thus the *counterposition* of ‘reform’ and ‘revolution’.

Marxists are social revolutionaries in the sense that we seek the transfer of social leadership from the capitalist class to the working class. We are also political revolutionaries in the sense that we understand that this cannot be finally achieved without the replacement of the current *political state order*.

The Trotskyists’ conception of ‘revolution’ has been the mass-strike strategy. As it has become clear that this strategy is illusory, ‘revolution’ reduces to the need for the ‘Leninist party’: that is, to a bastardised form of the false conclusions about the need for Bonapartist centralism that the Comintern drew from the belief that Europe was about to enter into generalised civil war.

At a more abstract theoretical level these ideas are given support by misinterpreting a real fact. This is that history moves at more than one speed: sometimes in a gradual, molecular fashion; sometimes in extremely rapid processes of change. It is the extremely rapid processes of change that are commonly called ‘revolutions’. The Trotskyists then argue that we need a ‘Leninist party’ for *future* revolutionary times. Some Trotskyists and ex-Trotskyists reverse the point: until the outbreak of open revolutionary crisis, we do not need a revolutionary politics.

The trouble is that social revolution and political revolution alike involve *both* the gradual molecular processes of change *and* the short burst of crisis. By fetishising the short burst of crisis the Trotskyists devalue the slow, patient work of building up a political party on the basis of a minimum *political* programme in times of molecular processes of change. The result is, when crisis does break out, they have created only sects, not a party, and are effectively powerless.

Fight for an opposition

As I have argued, the present problem is not to fight for a workers’

government, but for an *opposition* that will openly express the independent interests of the working class (chapter seven). Without beginning with the struggle for an opposition, there is no chance of confronting in the future the problem of an alternative governing authority to that of the capitalists.

In parliamentary regimes, which are now a common form across most of the globe, the capitalists rule *immediately* through the idea that the point of elections is to give legitimacy to a *government* that heads up the bureaucratic-coercive state - and electing representatives to the parliament or other representative bodies is only a way of choosing a government. This fetishism of government forces the formation of parties and coalitions in which the capitalists' immediate paid agents have a veto over policy, and creates the corrupt duopoly/monopoly of the professional politicians.

Within this political regime, to govern is to serve capital; and, therefore, to *create a coalition that aims to pose as an alternative government within this political regime* is also to serve capital. To fight for an opposition is to insist that we will not take responsibility for government without commitment to fundamental change in the political regime.

This is by no means to reject altogether either coalitions or blocs around single issues, or electoral agreements that can assist in getting past the undemocratic hurdles set up to secure the monopoly of the corrupt professional politicians - *provided these blocs or agreements do not involve either commitment to form a government or suspension of criticism*. It is perfectly acceptable to enter into such limited blocs or agreements not only with Labour and similar parties, but also with openly pro-capitalist ones. When, for example, the Liberals and some Tories opposed the religious hatred bill, they served the interests of the working class, whatever their reason for doing so.

We should not take *responsibility for government* without commitment to radical-democratic change. But we should propose, or support, both individual democratic reforms (such as freedom of information or a reduction in the patronage powers of the prime minister) and reforms that strengthen the position of the working class

(such as a national minimum wage or limitations on working hours).

To oppose in the interests of the working class is also to build political support for the immediate defensive struggles of the working class against capital. Direct political support is valuable. But so is indirect support, where the workers' party at every opportunity challenges the undemocratic character of the political regime - its corruption, its statism, its dependence on the financial markets and so on - and puts forward the alternative of the democratic republic. This activity serves to undermine the false claims of the regime to democratic legitimacy deployed against strikers, etc.

Patience

This strategic orientation demands patience. The fundamental present problem is that after the failures of the strategies of the 20th century, in the *absence* of a Marxist strategic understanding, most socialists are socialists by ethical and emotional commitment only. This leads to the adoption of 'get-rich-quick' solutions that enter into the capitalist politicians' government games.

This is the trouble with ideas that the LCR should join a new *gauche plurielle* project rather than addressing seriously the question of unity with Lutte Ouvrière; with Rifondazione's decision to participate in the Prodi government; with Die Linke's participation in a coalition with the SDP in Berlin; with the SSP's orientation to an SNP-led coalition for independence; with Respect. The result is not to lead towards an effective workers' party, but towards another round of brief hope and long disillusionment.

A different sort of impatience is offered by those who split prematurely and refuse *partial* unity in the hope of building their own 'Leninist party': the Sozialistische Alternative's split orientation in the process of formation of Die Linke; the splits of the Socialist Party and Workers Power from the Socialist Alliance; and so on. We find that, although these sects sell themselves as 'revolutionary', when they stand for election either to parliaments or in unions their policies are broadly similar to the coalitionists. They are still playing within the capitalist rules of the game.

The left, in other words, needs to break with the endless series

of failed 'quick fixes' that has characterised the 20th century. It needs a strategy of patience, like Kautsky's: but one that is internationalist and radical-democratic, not one that accepts the existing order of nation-states.

Notes

¹ “To stem Iraqi violence, US aims to create jobs”, *Washington Post* December 12 2006, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/12/11/AR2006121101318.html.

² See Daniel Kertzer, *Unholy war* (2003) and my review ‘The politics of purity’ *Weekly Worker* July 22 2004, www.cpgb.org.uk/worker/538/purity.htm.

³ Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, ‘Report to the president’, July 10 2006, www.cafc.gov/cafc/rpt/2006/68097.htm; signed off by co-chairs secretary of state Condoleeza Rice and secretary of commerce (and Cuban emigre) Carlos Gutierrez.

⁴ Comrade Clark’s letter to the *Weekly Worker* on this issue was partially cut, with the cut material appearing in a further letter which charged us with “expurgating” the original: the full text can be found at www.oneparty.co.uk/ under ‘what’s new’.

⁵ “What I should have said is: ‘A workers’ state is an abstraction. What we actually have is a workers’ state, with this peculiarity, firstly, that it is not the working class but the peasant population that predominates in the country, and, secondly, that it is a workers’ state with bureaucratic distortions.’” ‘The party crisis’ (January 1921) *CW* Vol 32, p48.

⁶ Destroyed majority support for the Bolshevik government: Brovkin, ‘The Mensheviks’ Political Comeback’ 42 *Russian Review* 1 (1983); Rosenberg, ‘Russian Labor and Bolshevik Power after October’ 44 *Slavic Review* 213 (1985), with Brovkin’s critique at id. 244 and Lewin’s at id. 239; Sakwa, ‘The Commune State in Moscow in 1918’ 46 *Slavic Review* 429 (1987).
Consequences in Germany: Luxemburg, ‘The Russian Tragedy’ (Sept 1918) www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/09/11.htm, and *The Russian*

Revolution, ch 3.

⁷ Eg Hillel Ticktin, letter to the *Weekly Worker* October 26 2006, www.cpgb.org.uk/worker/646/letters.htm.

⁸ Marot, 'Trotsky, the Left Opposition and the rise of Stalinism: theory and practice', *Historical Materialism* 14.3 (2006) at pp187-194 discusses the phenomenon, though his explanation of why it happened presupposes (in my opinion falsely) that a 'council communist' approach would have offered an alternative.

⁹ Kautsky, *The dictatorship of the proletariat* (1918) www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1918/dictprole/index.htm; Martov, *The state and the socialist revolution* (1918-23), www.whatnextjournal.co.uk/Pages/Theory/Martov.html; Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*.

¹⁰ Michael Lebowitz, *Build it now* (2006); Cliff Slaughter, *Not without a storm* (2006).

¹¹ The texts, including Callinicos's intervention, are in *Critique Communiste* No. 179 (March 2006). Some of them are translated in the January 2006 issue of the International Socialist Tendency Discussion Bulletin (IST DB) put out by the SWP's 'international': www.istendency.net/pdf/ISTbulletin7.pdf, and it is these which I have addressed here.

¹² Peter Manson, 'Defeat the liquidators' *Weekly Worker* February 21 2008, www.cpgb.org.uk/worker/709/defeatliquidators.html.

¹³ *Weekly Worker* July 29, August 5 and August 12 2004, accessible with other materials on the issue at www.cpgb.org.uk/theory/imperialism.htm.

¹⁴ *Weekly Worker* August 2 - Sep 16 2007.

¹⁵ It does not include the CPGB, since we are not, as an organisation, committed to 'permanent revolution'.

¹⁶ *MECW* 10 pp628-29, quoted in Meszaros, *Beyond Capitalism* (1995) p518 329n.

¹⁷ Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggle* (1975) is particularly helpful on this.

¹⁸ Text from www.revolutionary-history.co.uk/otherdox/Whatnext/POprog.html.

¹⁹ On communism and the family, as well as the *Communist manifesto*, see eg Michele Barrett & Mary McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family* (1982); Jamie Gough & Mike Macnair, *Gay Liberation in the 80s* (1985) ch 3; and Julie Tarrant's critique of Barratt & McIntosh, 'Family, Capital

and the Left Now' *The Red Critique 2* (2002), www.etext.org/Politics/AlternativeOrange/redtheory/redcritique/JanFeb02/FamilyCapitalandtheLeftNow.htm. The point of saying “the family as an economic institution” is that it is not communist policy but utopian speculation to attempt to prescribe how people should organise their sex lives and personal relationships in a future free of exploitation: but on the other hand, it is necessary to recognise that the family is still, under capitalism, an economic institution and one intimately connected with the inheritance of class position, and in this aspect of the family there can be no communism which does not *transcend* the economic role of the family.

²⁰ Marx, *Critique of the Gotha programme*, www.marxists.org.uk/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/index.htm; Engels to Bebel, March 1875, www.marxists.org.uk/archive/marx/works/1875/letters/75_03_18.htm.

²¹ *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Part I, § 5.

²² *Capital* i ch 25 § 3, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch25.htm#599a.

²³ There are convenient summary discussions, with web references, by Jack Conrad at www.cpgb.org.uk/worker/620/ecology.htm and <http://www.cpgb.org.uk/worker/631/ecology.htm>.

²⁴ Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's theory of revolution: critique of other socialisms* has the details.

²⁵ Eg, O'Rourke and Williamson, *Globalisation and History* (2001).

²⁶ (1899) www.marxists.org.uk/reference/archive/bernstein/works/1899/evsoc/index.htm.

²⁷ (1909) www.marxists.org.uk/archive/kautsky/1909/power/index.htm.

²⁸ www.marxists.org.uk/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/index.htm.

²⁹ The anarchists were formally excluded from the International - except insofar as they appeared as representatives of trade union organisations - in 1896.

³⁰ Engels to Kautsky, February 1891, www.marxists.org.uk/archive/marx/works/1891/letters/91_02_23.htm.

³¹ www.marxists.org.uk/archive/marx/works/1891/06/29.htm.

³² See www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1891erfurt.html.

³³ www.marxists.org.uk/archive/marx/works/1873/bakunin/index.htm.

³⁴ http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/hist_texts/structurelessness.html.

³⁵ “On democratic-centralism & the regime” (1937), www.marxists.org.uk/archive/trotsky/works/1937/1937-dc.htm, provides one example of this sort of argument among many which can be found in Trotsky’s *Writings* from the 1930s on the internal disputes in the sections of the international Trotskyist movement; most are not on-line.

³⁶ See also Jack Conrad’s discussion in *Weekly Worker* January 13 2005.

³⁷ See *Weekly Worker* November 11 2004.

³⁸ Eg Sebastiano Timpanaro, *On materialism* (1975) ch 3, esp. p77; Hal Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution vol i: the State and Bureaucracy, part 1* (1977), pp23-26; JD Hunley, *The life and thought of Friedrich Engels* (1991). This is not to say that efforts to reinstate the ‘Engels vulgarized Marx’ line don’t persist: eg Kan’ichi Kuroda, *Engels’ political economy* (2000); Norman Levine, *Divergent paths* (2006). But such authors *still* fail to answer the elementary point made by Timpanaro and Draper, that Marx read the whole of the *Anti-Dühring* in draft, wrote the part of it on political economy, and publicly categorically endorsed it.

³⁹ Hal Draper, *Karl Marx’s theory of revolution: critique of other socialisms* has the details.

⁴⁰ *Programme of the Parti Ouvrier*, quoted above ch 2.

⁴¹ Above n. 16.

⁴² www.marxists.org.uk/archive/marx/works/1894/letters/94_01_26.htm.

⁴³ ‘Third address’, www.marxists.org.uk/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm.

⁴⁴ www.marxists.org.uk/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/drafts/ch01.htm#D1s3ii.

⁴⁵ www.marxists.org.uk/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71_04_17.htm; original emphasis

⁴⁶ www.marxists.org.uk/archive/marx/works/1872/10/authority.htm.

⁴⁷ www.marxists.org.uk/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/postscript.htm.

⁴⁸ www.marxists.org.uk/archive/marx/works/1895/03/06.htm.

⁴⁹ www.marxists.org.uk/archive/marx/works/1895/letters/95_04_01.htm; www.marxists.org.uk/archive/marx/works/1895/letters/95_04_03.htm; discussed in Draper & Haberkern, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution vol v, War and revolution* Special Note D.

⁵⁰ More on the theoretical issues in my ‘Law and state as holes in

Marxist theory' *Critique* 40 (2006) pp211-236.

⁵¹ www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/02/english-revolution.htm.

⁵² www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1891/06/29.htm.

⁵³ 'The three sources and three component parts of Marxism', (1913) *CW* 19 pp23-28. The omission reflects both the general loss of democratic-republican understanding in the Second International, and the specific political regression of the British labour movement after 1871.

⁵⁴ Citation above n. 21.

⁵⁵ www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/letters/75_03_18.htm.

⁵⁶ www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1891/letters/91_09_29.htm.

⁵⁷ Draper & Haberkern, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution* v (2005) pp171-183 gives the context.

⁵⁸ 'Classical Marxism and grasping the dialectic' *Weekly Worker*

September 11 2003. Compare also Paul Blackledge. 'Karl Kautsky and Marxist historiography', *Science & Society* 70 pp337-359 (2006).

⁵⁹ Luxemburg: Ch 3 of the *Junius pamphlet* (1915), www.marxists.org.uk/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/ch03.htm; Trotsky: *War and the International* (1914), preface, www.marxists.org.uk/archive/trotsky/1914/war/part1.htm#preface

⁶⁰ Early examples in 'The war and Russian Social-Democracy', VI Lenin *CW* Vol 21, p35, and 'The position and tasks of the Socialist International', VI Lenin *CW* Vol 41, p349, both published November 1 1914.

⁶¹ Defeatism: Draper, *Lenin and the myth of revolutionary defeatism*, www.marxists.org/archive/drapper/1953/defeat/index.htm, at id., /chap3.htm, § 2; Zimmerwald: Lenin, *Tasks of the proletariat in our revolution* www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/tasks/post.htm; and the name, www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/7thconf/29i.htm (issue referred to a future congress for lack of time; but if it had been agreed by a clear majority, this would hardly have happened).

⁶² www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jul/x01.htm.

⁶³ 'The position and tasks of the Socialist International', VI Lenin *CW* Vol 21, p35.

⁶⁴ 'The defeat of one's own government in the imperialist war', VI Lenin *CW* Vol 21, p275.

⁶⁵ The objection is reported in ‘Revolutionary Marxists at the International Socialist Conference’, www.marxists.org.uk/archive/lenin/works/1915/sep/05.htm; Lenin’s response is in one of his speeches at the conference: www.marxists.org.uk/archive/lenin/works/1915/aug/26.htm, text at note 12.

⁶⁶ *Weekly Worker* July 29, August 5 and August 12 2004, accessible with other materials on the issue at www.cpgb.org.uk/theory/imperialism.htm.

⁶⁷ Britain: Bornstein and Richardson, *War and the International* (1986) 13-15, 40-41, 107. France: Pierre Frank, *The Fourth International* (1979) 64-67 (though Frank’s book is very self-serving, the *fact* of the split is in context a statement against Frank’s interests, and therefore reliable). China: Wang Fan-hsi, *Chinese Revolutionary* (1980) Ch 11.

⁶⁸ ‘The defeat of one’s own government...’

⁶⁹ Citation above n. 52.

⁷⁰ K Marx and F Engels CW Vol 27, p367ff, discussed in more depth in Draper and Haberkern, *Karl Marx’s theory of revolution* vol v, *War and revolution*, ch 7.

⁷¹ One example, among several in print, at www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/britain/britain/ch11.htm.

There is some interesting debate on this little bit of history, with relevant quotations, in Bob Pitt, ‘Sectarian Propagandism’, *Weekly Worker* October 18 2001, www.cpgb.org.uk/worker/404/propagandism.html, Ian Donovan, ‘Should we defend the Taliban’ *Weekly Worker* November 15 2001, www.cpgb.org.uk/worker/408/defend_taliban.html, and Joseph Green, ‘The socialist debate on the Taliban’, <http://home.flash.net/~comvoice/28cTaliban.html> and <http://home.flash.net/~comvoice/29cEmir.html>.

⁷² *Writings 1937-38*, p107; more at pp109, 111. Japanese direct colonisation of parts of China had begun with the annexation of Manchuria in 1931, but full-scale war was generally accepted to have begun in 1937.

⁷³ www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/09/liberation.htm. The contingency was violently unlikely, since the Vargas period was one in which British capitalist interests in Brazil were displaced by US capitalist interests, with the British *voluntarily* divesting their interests (Marcelo de Paiva Abreu, ‘British business in Brazil: maturity and demise, 1850-

1950', www.econ.puc-rio.br/mpabreu/pdf/rbe.pdf, pp20ff), while Brazil had in 1937 entered a formal alliance with the US. Hence, a British war with the Vargas regime in the 1930s, which was never remotely in question, would have amounted in substance to an attack on US imperial interests and precipitated a British-US inter-imperialist war.

⁷⁴ Cited above n. 66.

⁷⁵ *Writings 1939-40* pp251-259, 332-335; 'How to really defend democracy' (1940) www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1940/08/letter10.htm.

⁷⁶ A good many of the texts of this split are available at <http://www.marxists.org.uk/history/etol/document/fi/1938-1949/swp-wpsplit/index.htm>.

⁷⁷ I have argued elsewhere that there *were* 'other things' which justified *tactical* Soviet-defencism, ie the linkage between the Soviet state and the international workers' movement:

www.cpgb.org.uk/cu/USSR-Mike.doc, at §§ 25, 33-35.

⁷⁸ Second Congress of the Fourth International, resolution 'The USSR and Stalinism', www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/fi/1938-1949/fi-2ndcongress/1948-congress02.htm, § 27.

⁷⁹ Luxemburg: 'Organisational questions of the Russian social-democracy', www.marxists.org.uk/archive/luxemburg/1904/questions-rsd/index.htm; Trotsky: 'Report of the Siberian Delegation' (1903) www.marxists.org.uk/archive/trotsky/1903/xx/siberian.htm, and *Our Political Tasks*, www.marxists.org.uk/archive/trotsky/1904/tasks/index.htm.

⁸⁰ See Hal Draper *Karl Marx's theory of revolution Vol 4*, special note B.

⁸¹ '(Reply by N Lenin to Rosa Luxemburg) One step forward, two steps back', www.marxists.org.uk/archive/lenin/works/1904/sep/15a.htm.

⁸² 'The tasks of revolutionary social democracy in the European war' (August-September 1914). www.marxists.org.uk/archive/lenin/works/1914/aug/x01.htm.

⁸³ *Ibid* section 14.

⁸⁴ *Socialism and war* chapter 1, section 13, www.marxists.de/war/lenin-war/ch1.htm.

⁸⁵ For the first see Draper & Haberkern, *KMTR* vol v, Special Note D. For the second, John H. Kautsky *Introduction to Karl Kautsky*,

The Road to Power (trans. Raymond Meyer, 1996) ppxxi-xxiv.

⁸⁶ www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch03a.htm, and www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/3rd-congress/party-theses.htm.

⁸⁷ Marx to Kugelmann, 29 November 1869, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1869/letters/69_11_29.htm: “I have become more and more convinced - and the thing now is to drum this conviction into the English working class - that they will never be able to do anything decisive here in England before they separate their attitude towards Ireland quite definitely from that of the ruling classes, and not only make common cause with the Irish, but even take the initiative in dissolving the Union established in 1801, and substituting a free federal relationship for it.” Marx to Meyer and Vogt, April 9 1870, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1870/letters/70_04_09.htm. Engels, ‘Critique of the Draft Social-Democratic programme of 1891’, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1891/06/29.htm: “In my view, the proletariat can only use the form of the one and indivisible republic. In the gigantic territory of the United States, the federal republic is still, on the whole, a necessity, although in the Eastern states it is already becoming a hindrance. It would be a step forward in Britain where the two islands are peopled by four nations and in spite of a single Parliament three different systems of legislation already exist side by side.”

⁸⁸ www.marxists.org.uk/archive/marx/works/1891/06/29.htm, contained in ‘Political demands’.

⁸⁹ L Trotsky *Writings 1930-31* p155, ‘The crisis in the German left opposition’.

⁹⁰ Eg Alexander Rabinowitch, *Prelude to revolution* (1968) and *The Bolsheviks come to power* (1976); Russell E. Snow, *The Bolsheviks in Siberia* (1977).

⁹¹ Minutes of the 2nd Congress - www.marxists.org.uk/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch13.htm.

⁹² www.marxists.org.uk/history/international/comintern/4th-congress/united-front.htm.

⁹³ www.marxists.org.uk/history/international/comintern/4th-congress/tactics.htm.

⁹⁴ www.marxists.org.uk/archive/trotsky/works/1924/ffyci-2/08.htm.

⁹⁵ The confusion, both in the CPGB and in the Comintern, is carefully documented by Jack Conrad in his series '80 years since the 1926 general strike' available at www.cpgb.org.uk/theory/unions.htm, especially the fourth, fifth and sixth articles. See also texts by Stalin and Trotsky, of various dates, collected under the 5th Congress heading at www.marxists.org.uk/history/international/comintern/index.htm.

⁹⁶ See also in relation to Germany Mike Jones, 'The decline, disorientation and decomposition of a leadership: the German Communist Party: from revolutionary Marxism to centrism' (1989) *Revolutionary History* vol 2 No. 3, www.revolutionary-history.co.uk/backiss/Vol2/No3/decline.html.

⁹⁷ The origins of the 'third period' as *theory* and the role of Bukharin in the turn are discussed in Nicholas N. Kozlov & Eric D. Weitz, 'Reflections on the origins of the 'third period' (1989) 24 *Journal of Contemporary History* pp387-410.

⁹⁸ www.marxists.org.uk/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/08_02.htm#s6.

⁹⁹ www.marxists.org.uk/archive/marx/works/1864/10/27.htm.

¹⁰⁰ Original emphasis; *Socialism and war* chapter 1, section 14, www.marxists.org.uk/archive/lenin/works/1915/s+w/ch01.ht.

¹⁰¹ Eg Levi, 'Leaving Leninism' (1927) www.revolutionary-history.co.uk/supplem/Levlenin.htm.

¹⁰² www.marxists.org.uk/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch03a.htm.

¹⁰³ www.marxists.org.uk/history/international/comintern/4th-congress/tactics.htm.

¹⁰⁴ In *First five years of the Communist International Vol 2*, www.marxists.org.uk/archive/trotsky/works/1924/ffyci-2/24.htm.

¹⁰⁵ www.marxists.org.uk/archive/trotsky/works/1938-tp/index.htm#Workers_Government.

¹⁰⁶ More in my article on the Iraq war and the law, *Weekly Worker* September 25 2003.

¹⁰⁷ Various materials on the history of the First International are conveniently available at www.marxists.org.uk/history/international/iwma/index.htm.

¹⁰⁸ www.iisg.nl/archives/en/files/s/10769122full.php#N102E1.

¹⁰⁹ www.marxists.org.uk/archive/marx/works/1864/10/27.htm.

¹¹⁰ www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/letters/75_03_18.htm.

¹¹¹ The anarchists took the name in the 1870s, although they could not keep the movement up beyond a few conferences; the Marxists had moved the general council to New York in the hope of building a mass movement in the US, which proved to be illusory.

¹¹² Citation above n. 21.

¹¹³ www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1914/10/peace.htm. The text on the MIA is a summary in the BSP paper *Justice* of an article in *Die Neue Zeit*, but it seems unlikely that the translator-summarizer radically misunderstood Kautsky's arguments.

¹¹⁴ The comments of Marx and Engels on this issue in their critiques of the Gotha programme (citations above n. 20) are corroborated from other sources by S Miller and H Potcoff, *A History of German social-democracy from 1848 to the present*, trans. J.A. Underwood (1986), pp27-28.

¹¹⁵ The speech by Lenin on Poland and article by Tukhachevsky on the Red Army provide clear illustrations. See Al Richardson (ed) *In defence of the Russian revolution* (1995) pp134-158, 163-174.

¹¹⁶ 'Speech at the ceremonial meeting in the military academy of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army devoted to the fourth anniversary of the academy, December 7 1922', www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1922-mil/ch15.htm.

¹¹⁷ For several items on France, see L Trotsky *First five years of the Communist International* www.marxists.org.uk/archive/trotsky/works/1924/ffyci-2/index.htm. On Germany, L Trotsky *The Third International after Lenin* www.marxists.org.uk/archive/trotsky/works/1928-3rd/ti04.htm#b3. Mike Jones, 'German communist history' letter *What Next* No4, www.whatnextjournal.co.uk, reports the claim of KPD leader Brandler that detailed timetables for a German insurrection were settled in Moscow, and confirms it from work in Russian archives published by historians in the 1990s.

¹¹⁸ "Der Krieg ist eine blosse Fortsetzung der Politik mit anderen Mitteln" (Vom Kriege I, 1, 24). "Politik" can be translated either as 'policy' or as 'politics'. Christopher Blassford, 'Clausewitz and his works' (1992) www.clausewitz.com/CWZHOME/CWZSUMM/

CWORKHOL.htm, argues forcefully that the word is more accurately translated by ‘politics’ with its uncertainties and irrationalities rather than by the (apparently rational) ‘policy’.

¹¹⁹ Discussion in *Weekly Worker* March 31 2005. On the historical details of the turn, Haslam *Historical Journal* Vol 22, pp673-691 is illuminating.

¹²⁰ Minutes of the founding congress, in *Documents of the Fourth International* (1973), p289. The figures are probably an underestimate, since the list shows several organisations for which the secretariat did not have figures. However, it is most unlikely that the real numbers were much above 15,000 worldwide.

¹²¹ *Documents of the Fourth International* p29.

¹²² A picture needs to be built up from the decisions on particular sections in the *Documents* (above) and from the correspondence and contributions collected in Trotsky’s *Writings* (1975-79) or the fuller French *Oeuvres* (1978-87). Academic writers about Trotsky have generally been interested only in Trotsky’s more ‘theoretical’ and general writings, while Trotskyist writers have been too partisan, to do this systematic work. *Revolutionary History* has been mainly interested in the development of the Trotskyist movement in individual countries rather than of the international organisation as such. I will admit that the picture given in the text is extremely partial and impressionistic.

¹²³ Mandel in ‘Ten theses’ (1951) in *Toward a history of the Fourth International* Vol 4, part 4; variant forms have been consistently repeated by the Mandelites down to the present day.

¹²⁴ *Weekly Worker* October 9 2003.

¹²⁵ Collected at www.cpgb.org.uk/theory/unions.htm; especially the last article in the series.

Index

1903 split in the RSDLP	85-86
actuality of the revolution	95-96
African National Congress	8
All Trade Union Alliance	112
Alliance for Workers' Liberty (AWL)	6, 95
Alsace-Lorraine	64
American Revolution (1776-1787)	119
anarcho-syndicalists	38, 54
anti-globalisation movement'	7-8, 133
anti-imperialist front	73, 79-84, 167
Argentinian invasion of the Falklands/ Malvinas (1982)	80
Artous, Antoine	50, 66, 157
Austro-Prussian war (1866)	136
Bakunin, Michael	16
Bakuninism, Bakuninists	32, 33, 46, 113, 135, 158
ban on factions	98
Batista, Fulgencio	49-50
"Battle of Seattle"	9
Bebel, August	55, 64
Ben Bella, Ahmed	8
Bensaïd, Daniel (aka Jebrac)	113
Bernstein, Eduard	36, 50
Blanc, Louis	55
Bolshevik suppression of opposition parties	76

- Bolshevik suppression of soviet elections 76
- Bolsheviks, Bolshevism 8, 25, 52, 65, 91-98, 125, 126
- Brazilian Workers Party 7, 17, 33, 35, 125, 168
- British General Strike (1926) 106, 181n
- British Labour Party 41, 93, 100-101, 168
- British Labour Party “soft left” 33
- British revolution (1688-89) 118-119
- British Social Democratic Party (1981-88) 90
- Bukharin, Nikolai 88-89
- bureaucratic ‘socialism’ 10-14, 34, 138, 167
- Caetano, Marcelo 103
- Callaghan, Jim 48
- Callinicos, Alex 17-19, 29, 33, 168
- Cannon, James P. 86, 94
- Cartel des Gauches 102, 105
- Castro, Fidel 8, 9
- Castroism 8-9
- centralism and federalism 96, 180-181n87
- centralism, Bonapartist/bureaucratic 96-98, 119, 145-146, 148, 149, 151-152, 161, 168
- Chartism 29
- Chávez, Hugo 8-9, 16
- Cheka, NKVD 76, 82
- Chilean coup (1973) 36
- Chinese revolution (1927) 36
- Christian socialism 40
- Clark, Tony 11-12
- Claudin, Fernando 85
- Clausewitz, Carl von 147
- Cliff, Tony 113
- Cominform 131, 153
- Comintern 20-21, 26, 66, 69-70, 76, 79, 91-98, 100-111, 117-118, 120-127, 131, 133, 142-149, 150-151, 153, 155, 160-161, 183n117

communism and the family	174-175n19
Communist International see Comintern	
Communist League (1847-1850)	133-134
Communist Party of Great Britain (old)	32, 148
Communist Party of Great Britain (<i>Weekly Worker</i>)	90, 119-120
Confederación Nacional del Trabajo	46
Congress of Vienna	140
Conservative press	41
Constitutional Democrats (Kadets)	145
Correa, Rafael	8
Crimean War (1854-56)	136
Critique journal	10-11
Cuban revolution	49-50
De Leonists	52
Democratic Party (US)	41-42
democratic republican military policy	77-78
democratic republicanism	115, 159, 162-164
dialectic	65
dialectic of unity and outflanking	113
dictatorship of the communist party	67, 76, 117-118, 126
dictatorship of the proletariat	67
Die Linke	17, 171
Dimitrov, Georgi	107
Draper, Hal	70-71, 73, 74
duopoly of corrupt professional politicians	127-128, 163-164
Durand, Cedric	39, 50, 157
Ebert, Friedrich	48
Eisenachers	35-36
electoral cycles	41-42, 159
Engels, Friedrich	25-26, 26-27, 28-29, 30, 38, 39, 46, 54, 58-59, 60-61, 62, 62-64, 74-75, 90, 91, 92-93, 108, 115, 131, 135-136, 140, 159, 176n38

- Erfurt programme 39, 40, 62
- Eurocommunists 29-30, 32, 139, 146
- fall of France (1940) 74
- family farmers (peasants) 39
- “Finlandisation” 157
- First International 25, 108, 134, 135, 149, 154
- Fourth International 74, 132, 133, 140, 149-152
- Fourth International
 (International Committee), 1953-63 132, 140, 153
- Fourth International (Mandelite) 9, 15-16, 17-18, 132, 153-
154, 156, 168
- Franco-Austrian wars 136
- Freeman, Jo 46
- French revolution (1789-99) 119
- Frente Amplio 8
- “gender politics” 167-168
- “general staff of world revolution” 133, 146-149
- German revolution (1918-19) 13, 48, 69-70, 92, 143
- globalisation (and world systems) 33-34, 42-44
- Gotha Programme 28-29, 35-36, 108, 131, 136
- government 122-123, 127-128, 170-171
- government, coalition, coalitionism 39-44, 55-56, 65, 157-158
- government, workers’ or workers’
 and farmers’ 67, 115-130
- Grant, Ted 132
- “Green politics” 31-32
- Guevara, Che 9
- Haile Selassie 79
- Hardt, Michael 16
- Healy, Gerry and Healyites 94, 112, 132
- Hegelian-Marxists 44, 54
- Hitler-Stalin Pact (1939) and partitioning
 of Poland 81-83
- Holloway, John 8
- Hungarian revolution (1919-20) 13, 92, 143
- imperialism 57-58, 75-76, 87-88, 167

Indonesian coup (1965)	36
Industrial Workers of the World	52
International Communist League (1934-38)	150-152
International Left Opposition	150-152
International Socialist Tendency	17
Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990)	80
Italian factory occupations (1920-21)	13, 92, 143
Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1935)	79, 80
Italian unification (1860)	136
Japanese invasion of China (1937)	79
Kamenev, Lev	89
Kantianism	40
Kautsky, Karl	14, 24, 25-26, 27, 36-37, 39, 51, 56-57, 58, 65, 90, 115, 136-137, 145, 146, 171
Kautskyan, Kautskyism, Kautskyite	23, 27, 52-65, 71, 113, 122, 130, 131, 139, 142, 145, 159- 160, 171-172
Kinnock, Neil	90
Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (KPD)	125, 146, 147, 148
Kronstadt revolt (1921)	76, 142
Kuomintang (KMT)	79-81
labour bureaucracy and corruption	45-47, 89, 90-91, 109-111, 145-146
Lambert, Pierre and Lambertistes	94, 112-113, 132
Lassalleans	33, 34, 38
Lebowitz, Michael	16
Left Communists	142
Lenin, V.I.	12, 48-49, 68-70, 71-74, 75, 77, 81, 85, 86-88, 90, 108, 116-117, 140, 142, 143, 146, 150
“Leninism”, “Leninist”	23, 89, 91-99
“Leninist party”	45-46, 91-99, 168
Levi, Paul	111, 148

- Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) 16-19, 50, 66, 157, 161, 171
- London Bureau (1932-40) 112
- Lora, Guillermo and Loraites/Loristas 94, 132
- Louis Napoleon Bonaparte 141
- Lukacs, György 65
- Lutte Ouvrière 36, 132, 154, 171
- Luxemburg, Rosa 14, 25, 36-37, 47, 68, 85-86, 142
- Mandel, Ernest 154
- Maoism 8-9, 89, 133, 145
- Marne, first battle of 68
- Martov, Julius 14, 24
- Marx, Karl 10, 25-26, 26-27, 28-29, 30, 54, 55, 58, 60-61, 62-63, 91, 92-93, 108, 115, 131, 135-136, 140, 159
- “Marxism”, “Marxist” 22
- mass strike 44-48, 126, 158
- Mehring, Franz 39
- Mensheviks 49, 116-117, 145
- Meszáros, Istvan 16
- Militant Tendency (Britain) 132, 154
- Miners’ strike, Britain (1984-85) 30
- Miners’ strikes, Britain (1972, 1974) 48
- Minimum platform 123-125, 128-129
- Morales, Evo 8
- Moreno, Nahuel and Morenistas 132
- Museveni, Yoweri 8
- “nanny state” 41-42
- Narodnaya Volya 140
- national question 167
- Nazis, Nazism 65, 106
- Negri, Antonio 16
- neo-Marcyites 10-11
- Nkrumah, Kwame 8
- “Official Lefts” 106, 130
- opposition, need to build an 130, 169-172
- “Pabloites” 15, 140, 153

Paris Commune	25, 136
Parti Communiste Français (PCF)	102, 146
Parti des Travailleurs	112-113
Parti Ouvrier	26-27
Parti Socialiste (France)	168
Parti socialiste ouvrier et paysan (PSOP)	151
Partido Comunista Português (PCP)	103
Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM)	151
Partido Obrero Revolucionario (POR) Bolivia	46
Partido Socialista Popular (Cuba) (PSP)	50
Partito Socialista Italiano	101-102
party	32-33, 85-99, 164-166
party-state, liberal capitalist	118-119
party-state, radical democratic	119-120
people's front	107, 111, 112, 150
permanent revolution	167
proletariat (and class consciousness, workers' movement)	29-31, 32, 53-54, 161-162
Proudhonists	32
purifying" or "purging" splits	67, 81, 83, 86-91, 111
Quisling, Vidkun	74
Radek, Karl	148
Radical Party	102
"Rank and File Movements" (SWP)	112
Rawlings, Jerry	8
Red Army invasion of Poland (1920)	144
Rees, John	90
"reform or revolution"	168-169
Respect ("the unity coalition")	171
revolutionary defeatism	66-84
revolutionary defencism, "proletarian military policy"	64-65, 74-75, 79-84
Rifondazione Comunista	7, 17, 35, 168, 171
Ross, John	113

- Russian anarchists (1917) 46
- Russian Civil War 92, 97
- Russian left opposition 13-14
- “Russian question” (19th century) 140-141
- Russian Revolution 12-13, 24, 69, 116-117, 124, 125, 137-138, 141-42
- Russian Socialdemocratic Labour Party (RSDLP) 52, 69, 85-86, 90-91
- Russo-Finnish war (1940) 81, 151
- Salazar, António de Oliveira 103
- Sankara, Thomas 8
- Scheidemann, Philipp 48
- Schlieffen plan 68
- Scottish National Party 17
- Scottish Socialist Party 17, 35, 168, 171
- Second International 19-20, 21, 35-36, 45, 67, 69-70, 85, 86, 88, 103, 131, 133, 134-135, 138-139, 149, 155
- Section Francaise de l’Internationale Ouvrière (SFIO) 102
- Serbia 68
- Serrati, Giacinto 72
- Slaughter, Cliff 16
- Social Forums 33, 133
- “social movements” 31-32
- Social Revolutionary Party (SRs) 49, 116-117, 125, 145
- Socialdemocratic Party of Germany (SDP) 35, 36, 55, 64-65, 67-68, 87-88, 90, 125, 171
- Socialist Alliance (England and Wales) 171
- Socialist Party (England and Wales) 171
- Socialist Workers’ Party (UK) 15-16, 18-19, 83-84, 89-90, 94, 95, 112, 132, 154, 161, 168
- Socialist Workers’ Party (US) 81-83, 152, 153
- Soviet-defencism 167
- Soviets 48-49, 158

Sovnarkom	49, 116-117
Sozialistische Alternative	171
Spanish civil war	36, 48, 74, 82
Spanish revolution (1873-74)	48
Spartacists (ICL, IBT)	10-11, 83, 94, 132
stages theory	167
Stalin, Joseph	13, 89
Stalinism	10-14, 31
Stalinists	15, 94
state theory	60-62, 76-77
state, nation-state and international state system	33-34, 42-44, 62-65, 76-78
Sukarno	8
Taaffe, Peter	132
“tankies”	139
Third International <i>see</i> Comintern	
“Third Period”	14, 106, 150
Trotinforms	153-154, 155-156
Trotinterns	153-154, 155-156
Trotsky, Leon	12, 13, 25, 44, 46, 68, 71, 75, 76, 79-82, 85-86, 105, 106, 107, 112, 125-126, 127, 140, 141, 146, 147, 149-152, 184n122
“Trotskyism”, “Trotskyist”	22-23
Trotskyism, Trotskyists	32, 35, 46, 79-84, 89, 107, 112- 114, 140, 145, 146, 149-156, 158, 169
Trot-speak	146
Turati, Filippo	56
Twenty-one conditions	70, 85, 89, 102
“Two and a half International”	91, 103
Ulster Workers’ Council strike (1974)	81-82
Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (USPD)	146
United front	67, 99, 100-114
Unity policy	35-36, 67, 91

Universal suffrage and its limits	95, 127-128
“Vanguard party”	93-94
Vargas, Getúlio	79, 179n73
Vereinigte Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (VKPD)	102
Vietnam war, US movement against	72
Vollmar, Georg von	39
Wilson, Harold	48
worker-peasant alliance	97, 145
workers’ councils <i>see</i> Soviets	
workers’ international (also see First International, Second International, Comintern, Fourth International)	166-167
<i>Workers’ Power</i>	95, 132, 171
World War I	64, 66-77
World War II	138
Zapatistas	8
Zimmerwald movement	69
Zinoviev, Grigory	71, 81, 86-88, 89, 90, 108, 142, 143

