

## Is Zinovievism finished?

A reply to Alex Callinicos

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Alex Callinicos' article on the crisis in the SWP purports to be a defence of Leninism in the face of a 'flood of attacks' – by which Alex means the crisis that has engulfed the party over the mishandled investigation of allegations of rape and sexual harassment against a Central Committee member.

The piece does nothing of the sort, but is rather an encapsulation of the flaws that have brought us to this pass. It is clearly intended as an opening salvo in the CC's response to the growing opposition within the party. In particular it draws on the long tradition of dealing with dissent over particular issues by means of the absurd implication that that dissent is an attack on the heritage of the October revolution, accompanied by an airy dismissal of the actual facts. This manoeuvre assumes the following equivalences: that 'revolutionary party' means the model of democratic centralism adopted by the SWP in the 1970s, that this model replicates that of the Bolsheviks in 1917 and the decisions of the current leadership therefore embody the legitimacy of that revolution, which we can expect to be replicated in the conditions of the UK in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is pure substitutionalism – and on its own measure of providing strong interventionist leadership, is a complete failure.

First of all, take note that this is the first public intervention by a CC member, with the exception of the re-posting of an internal Party Notes statement. Alex's article is clearly similarly aimed at an internal audience: no one could use these arguments in their workplace to defend the SWP, for which the 'strong interventionist' leadership is supposed to provide the means. If members doubt this, they might test it in practice. When asked about allegations of a rape cover up in the SWP, by a workmate or fellow student or union activist, give Alex Callinicos's answer: euphemise about a 'difficult disciplinary case' and then mention that Owen Jones is a Labour supporter. See if that works. See if the Party still has their respect next time it launches an initiative. Then consider that the CC, having brought about this situation by their decisions, expect you to do what they will not, which is defend it in public.

Of course, it may be possible that your activist or trade unionist comrade has simply been misled by the gossip and half-truths of the 'dark side of the internet'. Incidentally, this blimpish insult is a disgrace: it implies that comrades concerned about the treatment of an allegation of rape and sexual harassment

within the SWP are equivalent to child pornographers and 401 scammers. Alex brushes aside the offline 'real world' motions calling for an emergency conference passed (at the time of writing) at 8 SWP branches, the motions critical of the CC passed at a further 8 and the statements of opposition issued by 13 SWSS groups. But what are the internet lies and half-truths? Alex does not tell us, but instead attempts to introduce into circulation an evasive euphemism by referring only to a 'disciplinary case'. Everyone knows this is an allegation of rape and sexual harassment. What are the 'lies' circulating about it?

### **Are they:**

**1)** That a complaint was made in July 2010 against comrade Delta? Alex may rely on the bureaucratic claim that no formal complaint was made to the Disputes Commission: this contradicts basic common sense as well as the introduction given by the DC member who opened the 2013 conference session, who referred to an -'informal complaint' in July 2010 and mentioned 'how the complaint was handled in 2010.'

**2)** That the nature of this complaint was obfuscated and the impression given that it was merely a case of unhappiness in a failed relationship? If so, why did the CC use conference time on a personal matter?

**3)** That the disputes commission into the complaint issued in September 2012 contained 5 close colleagues and associates of comrade Delta, and 2 members of the Central Committee on which he sat?

**4)** That one member of the DC found that it was likely that Comrade Delta had committed sexual harassment and that the rest found the case 'not proven' *not* that Delta was exonerated as a 'member in good standing'? The DC ruled 'not guilty' on the charge of rape: they therefore distinguished between 'not guilty' and 'not proven'. This implies that the CC believe that a member whom the DC consider may

be a sexual harasser – to a degree significant enough not to be given the protection of a ‘not guilty’ decision - is still ‘in good standing.’

**5)** That the complainant was denied the right to put her side of the case to conference in 2013?

**6)** That a second woman, having complained of sexual harassment by Delta, did not have confidence in the DC to deal with her complaint because of the way in which it had dealt with the first case?

**7)** That the women involved were asked questions about their drinking and relationship habits? They claim to have been: if Alex denies this, he is saying they are liars, not the internet.

Which of these are lies? If they are not lies, how on earth are comrades meant to defend these points to the class? Perhaps we are to rely on the notion that SWP members possess a ‘political morality’ that ensures they adjudicate correctly whether their comrades have raped someone. Try that also –there is no way it would be accepted by anyone outside the SWP, and hopefully not by many within it. Would you accept that argument of any other organization? It cannot withstand scrutiny from our own comrades in the (avowedly Leninist) sister organisations of the International Socialist Tendency, leading members of which are now participating in a boycott of SWP events and publications – let alone the wider layers of the class and its organisations which we formerly called ‘our periphery’ but to which Alex now refers as ‘Owen Jones and his like’.

What has this to do with the defence of Leninism? It is linked, although not in the way that Alex imagines: that because the conference voted for (by a handful of votes and not a majority of the delegates) the DC report, the matter is now closed. Alex simply makes a banal statement about majority votes being binding (as they are in Trade Unions, rugby clubs, Parliament, corporate AGMs...) without specifying the actual debate that is currently going on. It is the current model of party organization in the SWP that leads to the disconnection from reality behind the defence of Comrade Delta and the paralytic response to the crisis it has engendered. Alex suggests that this model bears the legitimacy of the October revolution and that those who depart from it have abandoned the project of working-class revolution. Let us state clearly: this claim is false. The Bolshevik leadership of 1917 was

elected individually. There was no ban on factions. On the eve of the October Revolution, Zinoviev and Kamenev publicly opposed the insurrection in Maxim Gorky's newspaper (the 'dark side' of the printing press, perhaps) and resigned from the Bolshevik Central Committee. They were not expelled from the Party.

The model operated currently by the SWP is not that of the Bolshevik revolution. It is a version of the Zinovievite model adopted during the period of "Bolshevisation" in the mid-1920s and then honed by ever smaller and more marginal groups. When Alex implies that somehow we have developed a 'distilled' version of Bolshevik democratic centralism he is not holding to the tradition of October: it is asking us to choose the model that has led to three of the most serious crises in the SWP's history in quick succession over the model that actually did lead the October revolution.

Alex concedes in passing that there are different models of democratic centralism, but ends by effectively arguing that there is really only one: the model which currently exists in the SWP. But merely invoking the term "democratic centralism" does not tell you anything about which level of decision get made by which people, how frequently decisions are made or what mechanisms should exist for review, let alone how to elect a Central Committee or of whom it should be consist. Two examples will show how our current model is weighted towards centralism at the expense of democracy.

The first is in relation to decision making. According to the theory, conference discusses and decides (democracy) and then comrades, including those who opposed the agreed position, carry out the decisions (centralism). Fine: but what does conference actually decide? It is presented with a series of general perspective documents which are usually so bland and platitudinous that it is virtually impossible to disagree with them: the economic crisis is not going to be resolved, times are hard but there are also opportunities, we must not be complacent over the threat of fascism, and so on. To agree with this kind of statement is not to make a decision over strategy or tactics, or anything specific enough for the CC to be held to account. The real decisions about actual policy – to establish united fronts, to join electoral coalitions – are almost always made by the CC itself between conferences, with conference asked to ratify them after the event.

The second is in relation to the composition of the CC. The CC self-selects: it has an agreed political perspective; when someone dies or resigns it chooses as replacements comrades who agree – or who are thought to agree – with that perspective; at no point is the chain ever broken by open political debate. And if the perspective is wrong? The problems extend to the membership of the CC. What are the requirements of a potential CC member? There are apparently two: that they should live in or around London and that – with a handful of exceptions – they are full-time employees of the party. So - the comrades who are eligible for membership of the CC are those who until their selection have been paid to carry out the decisions of the previous CC and who, because they tend to have been students beforehand, rarely have any direct experience of the class struggle. How can a leadership this narrow be capable of forming an accurate perspective?

To deal with one diversionary objection: to complain about the composition of the CC is not to demand that ‘federalist’ structure. We do not want a CC in which its members represent trade unionists, or community activists or students – but we do want a CC which embodies the actual experience of these groups. Some roles on the CC can only ever be carried out by full-timers, notably the editor of *Socialist Worker* and the national Secretary, but the balance should always be towards those for whom the experience of the “real world” is inescapable.

After the catastrophes of the last five years a measure of humility would also be welcome. Alex is part of the ‘strong, interventionist’ leadership that has presided over this disaster with no effective response, following on from a period of near permanent crisis that began with the failure of the Respect adventure – for which Alex surely also bears some collective responsibility, as a member of the CC at the time. When will this strong, interventionist leadership ever hold itself responsible for what happens on its watch? What do they think has gone wrong? If they can’t manage this, how will they cope in a revolution?

We agree with Alex that the SWP is the best hope for developing a revolutionary party in in Britain. It has at least two great historic achievements to its credit in the Anti-Nazi League and its successors, and the Stop the War Coalition – movements which actually helped to change aspects of British society for the better, particularly in relation to

racism. They are among the reasons why have remained members in spite of the obstacles which successive leaderships have thrown up to democracy in the party. But if the SWP is ever to achieve its full potential the current situation cannot be allowed to continue.

Alex reiterates that if the SWP did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it. We agree – and that for the party to continue to exist, it is necessary to reinvent it. This is not alien to our tradition: perhaps it is best to leave the last word to one of its brightest lights, David Widgery in his review of the third volume of Cliff’s biography of Lenin:

“The blossoming-blighting process which Cliff documents froze over Leninism and only mass revolutionary working-class action is able to melt it from its icy limbo. Lenin is therefore trapped in his moment, surrounded by a thicket and awaiting political rescue: ‘An old communist conceives an embryo of longing’. One day, his Modern Prince will come. Until he is woken with the proletarian kiss, the problem is not that Leninism has failed, but that it has not been tried.”

The time for Leninism to be tried is now long overdue.

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