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WHO WILL TEACH THE TEACHERS?

1. My starting point for this discussion paper (or whatever we call it) was a phrase in Alex Callinicos's Socialist Review piece in February "In defence of Leninism". Like most documents at the time, it was a defence of the Central Committee rather than a serious discussion of Leninism, but one phrase in it struck me. "The Central Committee must campaign among party members". At one level, it seemed an obvious restatement of the task of leadership. But in the reality of the party's internal life in January it took on a different meaning, suggesting not an open and comradely debate, but an imposition of the authority of the CC on a reluctant membership.

The relationship it posited between leadership and party members seemed analogous to the relationship we describe between the vanguard and the working class in general. The advanced sectors of the working class have grasped the reality of a class society beyond the specifics of their particular experience of it in local and sectional struggles. Their task then is to lead the day to day struggles and to campaign to convince those they fight with of the larger vision of class society. That's a very simple summary of course, but it serves to highlight the relationship between leadership and led in the working class movement.

The analogy is simply wrong. Every member of the revolutionary party has taken a political decision to identify with that vanguard, and made a commitment to lead wherever they are. The difference in experience among members is horizontally distributed; every member comes to the party as a result of their contact with class society and their desire to fight for a different world. Their experience will, of course, be partial and very possibly contain contradictions. We are none of us immune, after all,

to the ideological pressures of capitalism nor to the material limitations it places upon us. And that means none of us.

2. Political recognition within the party, and election to the leadership, can come as a result of playing a leading role within the movement, or as a recognition of the particular contribution a comrade can make at a point in time. But it can never represent an acknowledgment of superiority, nor a permanent arrangement, because the politics of the revolutionary party are the outcome of a permanent and active collaboration among all its members. as a result of which strategies move and change. The central committee's role is to organize, in the day to day and to lead while remaining always accountable to the party. It cannot substitute its internal discussions for the debate that drives the party forward. Greater knowledge gives individual comrades a greater weight in particular discussions – and that is the only authority they can claim. Furthermore, that authority has to be won again and again – it does not come with the job nor is it timeless. What yesterday may have been an authoritative intervention may tomorrow become an obstacle to progress. In Cliff's words, "Marxists generalize the living, evolving experience of the class struggle".

John Molyneux (in *Marxism and the party*) argues this:

"because the party is a combat organization, it has no room for a layer of passive card holders or of privileged, secure bureaucrats. Its membership must be active and self-sacrificial (*sic*) and is likely therefore to be young" (165)

There is no suggestion here that youth enters into a kind of apprenticeship at the feet of the master. Lenin's argument with the 'committeemen' struck at that suggestion very forcefully. On the contrary, the experience of the young is an essential and equal component of the political debate which is the material out of which the party's strategy is forged. The very suggestion that they are in some sense more vulnerable to the pressures of capitalism or more

open to other, non-revolutionary influences than anyone else, falls into the same trap that Alex falls into – the presumption that there is a layer of the party that has become immune to such pressures. That can only lead in one direction – towards a situation in which that leading layer sees the party as hostile because it contains contrary and even contradictory arguments and interpretations. Yet that is its very quality, its value – that it makes and remakes a revolutionary politics in a vigorous and impassioned argument with the wider society. To have relinquished that contact, or refuse to engage with those influences, creates defensive corrals from which the defenders exclude the potentially corrupting influences of a shifting, changing wider world which comrades, because they work and organize with others outside the party, are far closer to. When the wagons are hauled into a circle, that contact is lost. Within the besieged fortress are those who bear the truth; but the bearers of truth never won a battle nor changed the world. That is what Rosa Luxemburg was so adamant about.

3. There is a growing gap between our theory and our practice; the experience of the real world does not consistently inform or shape our theoretical development – or at least it does so less and less. I feel that this reflects the growing influence of an academic Marxism which operates without reference to the concrete application of theory – and that the SWP comrades most engaged with that milieu are comfortable and complacent about it. The result has been that the extraordinarily rich theoretical tradition on which the SWP stands has not developed as it should in recent times and in response to obvious shifts in the balance of class forces, to the new role of Labour as a collaborator in the austerity drive, to important ideological changes, to the impact of globalization. The so-called theoretical developments around the united front, which Rees offered in a recent article as an example of a new direction, are rarely more than justifications of tactical decisions. And yet we are living today through a period of massive change, in which we can only operate to the

extent that we understand and debate those changes. The experience of argument and discussion which was once the feature of the party's internal political life, and the source of its political development, has now all but disappeared.

A critical example is our attitude to the trade unions and their rank and file. There seems to be a serious contradiction here which has simply been brushed over. We seem on the one hand, especially in our references to the Minority Movement, to be dedicated to the building of rank and file organization. This is the repeated narrative in relation to the trade union movement, which blocks any serious discussion about what is happening in the working class. Yet in reality we appear often to be working with the bureaucracy at various levels in developing initiatives which are essentially top down, while at the same time denouncing the trade union bureaucracy. The problem is that this seems to make another, quite dangerous assumption – that the working class is essentially combative but is constantly held back by the bureaucrats. That was the narrative on November 30th 2011. When the predicted rise in the level of working class resistance did not appear, there was no explanation – only a sort of repetition of the same narrative in the hope that something would happen.

Yet in that same period some extraordinary things *were* happening. An extremely combative and imaginative student movement was emerging, unexpectedly perhaps, and dramatically, that coincided with Occupy and other social movements. Here again, comrades took leading roles and brought a layer of wonderful student comrades into the party. But the leadership simply failed to respond to their experience, and to the political implications that followed when their movement too faltered after such incredible beginnings. We offered no bridge between their experience and the international socialist tradition, only the kind of political education that Freire calls “banking education” – namely the delivery of pre-digested ideas to

be learned and repeated. So the new ideas, the new reality that the movement had responded to, and the comrades' experience of it, was ignored – instead of being the foundation of political development, building on the experiences and understandings of the party's new recruits. It was as if you could only enter the theoretical arena after a long period of waiting in an anteroom. So there was no controversy, no argument, no cultivation of the habits of democratic debate which Hallas argues is the essence of democratic centralism.

“A revolutionary party cannot possibly be created except on a thoroughly democratic basis; unless, in its internal life, vigorous controversy is the rule and various tendencies and shades of opinion are represented, a socialist party cannot rise above the level of a sect. Internal democracy is not an optional extra. It is fundamental to the relationship between party members and those amongst whom they work” (Party and class 21)

And he goes on

“The self-education of militants is impossible in an atmosphere of sterile orthodoxy. Self-reliance and confidence in one's ideas are developed in the course of that genuine debate that takes place in an atmosphere where differences are freely and openly argued. The 'monolithic party' is a Stalinist concept. Uniformity and democracy are mutually incompatible”

When eventually and reluctantly, the CC suddenly reversed its strategy towards the student movement, it did so with no explanation, no argument, replacing both with a loyalty test, which just reinforced the gulf between the leadership and that significant section of party members. The concept of a party that is democratic only for three months a year, and that the assemblies that take place in between are constructed and controlled by the central committee is a pathetic caricature of Hallas's clear vision.

Are we fetishising discussion? The old chestnut, thrown at me several times in recent months, that “you just want to sit

around talking instead of acting”, is fairly easily answered. There is no ban on talking while walking, marching; to be an active socialist should mean discussing the world with comrades while being active in it. And while we will act together our controversies will contribute to our intervention rather than detract from it.

4. How then do we create a symbiotic relationship within the party that will in turn generate that relationship between the party and the class ? Surely the starting point must be that we address the same reality. If a significant sector of the party fails to recognize the portrait painted by the leadership, then the leadership is likely to be wrong – because they in turn will be unable to win those they lead and influence to recognize it.

The issue we have to address is what has allowed the CC to grow increasingly distant from party members, to the extent that it is now defending its own interests against the interests of the party and the class. Increasingly it has not been the best interests of the class that have dominated the party’s thinking but the best interests of a party leadership which it deems to be synonymous with the best interests of the class. This has a long history. The CC has been full time for decades and its contact with the world of work is at best second hand. The existence of an NC, for example, which should discipline the CC and continually test the adequacy of the CC’s leadership, is vitiated by a method of selection of members by the CC. Control from the centre is so overwhelming that it is impossible to imagine local leaderships emerging at a distance from the CC and independently of it. Similarly the CC elections and the votes at Party Congress. The restricted discussion period and the method of leadership makes it unlikely that dissenting voices can be raised in an atmosphere of respect and mutual recognition -for the best and worst of reasons. The best is the loyalty of comrades; the worst is the creation of full time servants *of the CC* rather than of the party, who act as a transmission belt downwards and as a block on independent critical thought rising from the

party's base to its leadership. The process towards the Special Conference illustrated that at its very worst. The defence of the bureaucratic and administrative methods referred time and again to constitutional rules – as if our political conduct should be governed by rules whose task is to reflect our organizational methods, rather than be laws governing them. In a formal sense, the CC won a vote across the country – but it did so by using those rules to impede debate at the same time as mobilizing a large number of comrades across the country who had not participated in the debate within the party until that point, representing the internal crisis as an attack by hostile external forces.

The moment at which the leadership refuses to recognize the origin of that imbalance is the moment at which it defines itself by differentiating itself from the majority of party comrades. And that – to define your relationship with the working class and the movement by *difference* – is the very definition of sectarianism.

5. The starting point for this internal debate was the Disputes Committee and its decision. I don't want to go into the specifics of the case at this point. All I do want to say is that the reaction of the leadership was to argue that the central issue was confidentiality. But whose? In reality, they were arguing that the CC's actions should not be open to scrutiny, in other words that they should be governed by confidentiality – as they already are, since the CC publishes no record of its discussions. Clearly confidentiality was not really the issue. There was a question of justice. And there was a question of our attitude to rape. Yet both these issues were hidden behind the assertion that the CC's decisions were beyond questioning. The argument that the conference decision was democratic falls on a very simple ground. Bourgeois democracy is characterized by the fact that the information on which a decision should be made is withheld or distorted or hidden behind mechanical and administrative precepts. In a socialist democracy there is no privileged information and

insofar as we practice it internally (which can be questioned) it can only be legitimate if full knowledge is provided and other options offered for the resolution of the question. Neither was the case at conference, which makes the argument about party conference's democratic procedures specious. The Special Conference on the 10th March abandoned even the pretence of democratic procedures, drawing on the "passive card holders" as John calls them to join the CC in its battle with the party itself. And subsequent persecutions of critical comrades have served to reinforce the parody of democracy that we are operating.

This is more than simply a question of uncomradely behaviour. The hostile and confrontational attitude towards party comrades *over time* has led to a deeply flawed strategy, or to be more accurate to an absence of strategy – a gap then filled by frenzied activity, and in particular paper selling and campaigning around specifics. Now, the successful campaigns

– from Stop the War through UAF to the Jerry Hicks campaign have all been united fronts of one kind or another. We have been instrumental in all of them and have won widespread respect for our energy and commitment. There has been much less respect for the manner in which we have conducted ourselves politically within those campaigns. There is no doubt that we were a moving force within STWC – but we were not the sole leadership and nor was the movement dominated by our *politics*, though it was led by our tactical advice. This was by no means uncontested, but we dealt with criticism bureaucratically and with arrogance. *We declared* ourselves the leadership and the comrades representing us in the leadership of Stop the War – comrades Rees, German and Nineham – came to believe their own myth. Their vocation to lead reproduced their attitudes within the party, and they adopted exactly similar methods and postures within Respect, which grew out of Stop the War. Was it really Galloway who destroyed Respect? Or was it

our total failure to argue with him politically, because of the short term benefit he could bring those comrades (and not the party as a whole), until it was too late, that destroyed the organization? In the case of UAF we have led in the absence of other organizations, but absolutely not without the support of many local groups and movements. Yet the relationship we have with them is much the same, and our claims for UAF – that it is solely responsible for the weakness of fascism in this country – is plainly partial and misleading. We have believed the myth to such an extent that the party has been prepared to abandon fundamental ethical and political positions to defend Comrade Delta because he leads that organization and we clearly see him as indispensable.

These are not organizational questions, but profoundly political ones. As Hallas says, debate is not an optional extra, it is the process through which we know and understand the changes happening around us. The shape of the working class is changing, the main struggles that are emerging now across the world and not just in Britain are the many forms taken by struggles against austerity, in defence of welfare, against capital itself in the form of the banks. The simple truth is that these movements have a new and different character. They are diverse, multiple, often very locally based; they arise around specific issues and are in the best sense defensive. Many of the people involved have no history or experience of political organization. This means of course that they are vulnerable to left groups seizing control of the movements opportunistically, just because they have organizational experience and the energy to work hard. But that is not the same thing as winning the movement *politically*. Party Notes recently claimed that the SWP is at the centre of the bedroom tax movement. Already ? It's still in its earliest formative stage – it has no shared strategies. These are evolving as the weeks go on, and hopefully growing at the base of the movement. We are after all committed to the self-emancipation of the working class rather than its representatives. Though that is the very heart of the

international socialist tradition, we seem often to forget it in our practice. And though we, the left that is, may actually control these movements, those who have driven it will, as often as not, simply drift away in disillusion, permanently lost to the revolution.

The reality is that we announce ourselves as the party of the working class, and dominant on the left (“punching above our weight”). But what is important here is not the relative division of spoils within the left but the weight of the left in the wider movement. In Britain the left is small and quite marginal. Yet many of the key fighters – the vanguard of the class – are members of the SWP. Their position is now significantly weaker. We cannot claim, and now less than ever, dominance. That means that our method of working will have to change in recognition of that.

The practical conclusions are harder to identify, since what we are essentially addressing is an issue of political culture. But since we are talking about the party’s leadership, there is a serious issue about its composition. The slate system seems to me to encourage a situation like the present in which the CC presents a united face to the party come what may. In the history of our movement it has been common for leading committees to reflect internal debates – for factions for example to be represented there. Why not now? We are a revolutionary organization in a bourgeois democracy – we don’t have any need to operate with a command model. In a revolutionary situation that may well change, but we are a little way off from that still. And Greece and Spain tell us that when resistance is generalized, it won’t necessarily bend to a central leadership anyway. There is also no obvious reason why the CC has to consist only of full timers; and there are plenty to suggest that shouldn’t be the case.

We should stop trading quotes from Lenin. Not that he has not much to teach us, but that the first lesson he will offer is that the forms and methods of organization of revolutionaries will be shaped by the historical circumstance, and will change constantly as those

circumstances change. There are no rules to be applied, no constitutions to obey. There is a revolutionary method – one part of which acknowledges that the teachers must themselves be taught by those they set out to instruct.

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