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The SWP crisis and Leninism

Paul D'Amato, author of *The Meaning of Marxism*, examines the arguments put forward about Leninism by a leading member of the Socialist Workers Party-Britain.

February 11, 2013

A LONGSTANDING discussion on the left about Leninism and revolutionary organization has reemerged in a new light in the context of a crisis in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in Britain-- more specifically, with an article titled "Is Leninism Finished?" written in relation to the party crisis by Alex Callinicos, probably the best-known member of the SWP's Central Committee (CC).

The disagreements within the SWP stem from the handling of accusations of rape and sexual misconduct against a leading member, but also revolve around the party leadership's response to the accusations and to the sharp debate that followed, inside and outside the party. Written with specific reference to this debate, Callinicos' article in the February 2013 *Socialist Review* is, by turns, a sketchy history of certain concepts related to Leninism, like democratic centralism, and a bitter denunciation of critics of the SWP leadership's actions.

My article is written in response to Callinicos' piece, and the conclusions it draws about Leninism and revolutionary organization for socialists today.

THE DEBATE within the SWP has continued since a national conference in early January, despite Callinicos' claim that disagreements are confined to a "small minority." The CC has told SWP members that discussion of this highly charged question must cease, even though several votes on contentious issues at the conference were decided by narrow margins. This attitude has provoked organized opposition among SWP members, including the declaration of a faction last week that is challenging the actions of the CC and National Committee since the conference.

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Callinicos' article is plainly meant to be the statement of the SWP leadership defending itself, and claiming the authority of Leninism back to the Russian Revolution as justification.

It's more than a little ironic that the SWP leadership has used one of the party's magazines to respond publicly about an internal dispute that it has declared closed, but it doesn't afford the opposition the same right--at the same time as it complains about its critics' use of "blogs and social media" to air their views.

In the article, Callinicos links together a response to Owen Jones, a left-wing Labour Party supporter who argued in the *Independent* that the SWP's crisis proved the futility of building a far-left party based on Leninism, with a response to the SWP leadership's internal critics.

Leon Trotsky once described this debating technique as an "amalgam"--linking two separate things together in order to create guilt by association. Callinicos not only avoids having to respond seriously to the issues raised by SWP members, but he is able to declare them opponents of Leninism like Owen Jones. This dangerous misuse of the label "Leninism" does a disservice to the political tradition we share--indeed, arguments of this kind are certain to convince many people outside the SWP that "Leninism" should be given a wide berth.

"A minority inside the SWP are refusing to accept the democratically reached conference decisions," Callinicos writes--something he describes as "scandalous." This minority, he claims, is seeking a "different" model of organizing that involves "a much looser and weaker leadership," endless internal debate, and "permanent factions." Added together, Callinicos concludes, this is a recipe for a "much smaller and less effective organization, unable to help build broader movements."

So what does all this have to do with the actual tradition of Leninism?

To start with, it is pure formalism to claim, as Callinicos does, that votes were taken at an SWP conference, and therefore, everything is settled. Contentious disagreements within a revolutionary organization can't be resolved by administrative or coercive means. No healthy organization responds to such an outcome on

an important issue by telling its members to cease discussion--still less, by inventing political differences to justify denouncing those you disagree with.

The issue in the SWP is this: A section of the organization has lost confidence in the leadership because of its actions--and leadership in a Leninist organization must be won, not imposed. The leadership's circling of the wagons through a reliance on organizational formalities to defend its position has nothing at all to do with Bolshevism or Leninism.

Trotsky called this "ostrich" politics. Is the SWP so fragile that it cannot allow a discussion to go beyond what the rules formally allow? Surely airing a debate and letting all shades and positions be expressed as fully as possible would only strengthen the organization--whereas clamping down would make it more brittle, and therefore, more prone to shatter.

SWP leaders might consider the advice that Trotsky gave in 1940 to members of the SWP-U.S., when they were going through an acute internal debate over the nature of the Soviet Union:

The continuation of discussion bulletins immediately after a long discussion and a convention is, of course, not a rule but an exception, a rather deplorable one. But we are not bureaucrats at all. We don't have immutable rules. We are dialecticians also in the organizational field. If we have in the party an important minority which is dissatisfied with the decisions of the convention, it is incomparably more preferable to legalize the discussion after the convention than to have a split.

Callinicos, moreover, denounces members who criticize the leadership for positions they don't hold. If they aren't for closing off discussion, then they must be for "endless internal debate." If they don't accept that factions can exist only for three months before a national conference--and in practical terms, for a shorter period than that--then they must be for "permanent" factions. If they question the actions of the leadership, then they must be for "weak" leadership. And on and on.

But Callinicos offers no evidence that SWP members who oppose closing *this particular* discussion hold such positions. That's because, as far as can be told from what has been written, no

such evidence exists.

MUCH OF the rest of what Callinicos writes in his article is an unobjectionable, though extremely abbreviated, response to Owen Jones. There are generalities about the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Bolshevik Party led by Lenin, about democratic centralism, about the changing nature of capitalism and the working class, about the nature of the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy, the decline of traditional left parties (though he leaves out the obvious--the decline of the organized revolutionary left), the rejection of political organization by many of today's activists, and so on.

The problem is that whatever truth these generalities may have in the abstract, they are press-ganged here into service for a cause they can't support.

"Our version of democratic centralism," writes Callinicos, "comes down to two things. First, decisions must be debated fully, but once they have been taken, by majority vote, they are binding on all members. This is necessary if we are to test our ideas in action." The SWP model of democratic centralism, Callinicos says, calls for "strong political leadership" that "campaigns within the organization to give a clear direction to our party's work."

The concept of democratic centralism that Callinicos outlines here has to do with decisions regarding political policies and actions, not disciplinary cases. There is no "testing our ideas in action" concerning such cases, so this argument is a red herring. The point is that a substantial minority in the party does not feel that the issues involved in the disciplinary dispute have been "debated fully."

There is nothing wrong with strong political leadership. But it is one-sided to present the party leadership as a homogeneous body that "campaigns" in the organization for its line. The key to a healthy revolutionary organization is in its "cadres"--that is, in the size and influence of its experienced members. Such an organization constantly strives to create a membership of sufficient strength and confidence that its leadership can be constantly replenished.

Such a cadre can't be built if the organization's conception of leadership is one in which a politically homogenous central committee "campaigns," and the membership is the passive receiver of the leadership's decisions. There must be a give and take, a flow of debate and discussion.

The question is not one of formalism, but of a political method. Democracy in a revolutionary organization with a strong and sizable cadre means fruitful debate and decision-making, coupled with the flexibility to adapt and, without defensiveness, to reassess and change direction.

In *The New Course*, written in 1923, Trotsky made an impassioned plea against a conception of leadership in which all wisdom flows from the top down, and in which the formation of factions is viewed suspiciously:

It is in contradictions and differences of opinion that the working out of the party's public opinion inevitably takes place. To localize this process only within the apparatus, which is then charged to furnish the party with the fruit of its labors in the form of slogans, orders, etc., is to sterilize the party ideologically and politically.

To have the party as a whole participate in the working out and adoption of the resolutions is to promote temporary ideological groupings that risk transformation into durable groupings and even into factions. What to do? Is it possible that there is no way out? Is it possible that there is no intermediate line between the régime of "calm" and that of crumbling into factions? No, there is one, and the whole task of the leadership consists, each time that it is necessary and especially at turning points, in finding this line corresponding to the real situation of the moment.

LENIN WAS anything but an organizational fetishist. Organizational methods for Lenin were--as Callinicos notes in one of his general sections surveying the experience of the revolutionary tradition of the past--adaptable to the conditions of the day. Illegal conditions required certain forms of clandestine organization, for example, that weren't applicable in periods of revolutionary upheaval.

Moreover, Lenin did not stick to the letter of organizational norms when he felt something crucial to the success of the revolution was at stake. On more than one occasion in 1917, he went around the Central Committee in order to appeal to other leadership bodies and sections of the party to win his position.

In other words, the leadership of the Bolshevik Party during the Russian Revolution was not monolithic. Lenin often found himself in a minority in 1917. During key moments in and after 1917, factions developed with sharply different positions. Historian Marcel Leibman, in his book *Leninism under Lenin*, reviews a number of key decisions voted on by the Bolshevik Central Committee and by delegated conferences during 1917, none of which were unanimous, and concludes:

All these votes show that a strong minority, the numbers of which fluctuated, but which was always there, existed among the Party cadres, and there was never any question of excluding this minority from the *executive* organs of the Party....

This desire to associate the minority with the deciding and application of Party policy is to be seen in other ways: the presence of "minority" members in the Bolshevik press organs, and the practice of providing for a "minority report," giving a representative of the "opposition" an opportunity of expounding the latter's view in thorough fashion at important Party meetings.

Expulsions for political reasons, moreover, were extremely rare, as Trotsky noted in 1931, writing about the Bolsheviks and against the "monolithism" of Stalinism after the rise of a counterrevolutionary bureaucracy:

This unanimity is represented as a sign of the particular strength of the party. When and where has there yet been in the history of the revolutionary movement such dumb "monolithism"? ...

The whole history of Bolshevism is the history of intense internal struggle through which the party gained its viewpoints and hammered out its methods. The chronicles of the year 1917, the greatest year in the history of the party, is full of intense internal struggles, as also the history of the first five years after the conquest of power; despite this--not one split, not one major expulsion for political motives.

Alexander Rabinowitch, in his excellent book *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, which describes in detail the role that the Bolsheviks played in 1917, notes the open, democratic and freewheeling character of the party in this period:

Perhaps even more fundamentally, the phenomenal Bolshevik success can be attributed in no small measure to the nature of the party in 1917. Here, I have in mind neither Lenin's bold and determined leadership, the immense historical significance of which cannot be denied, nor the Bolsheviks' proverbial, though vastly exaggerated, organizational unity and discipline. Rather, I would emphasize the party's internally relatively democratic, tolerant and decentralized structure and method of operation, as well as its essentially open and mass character--in striking contrast to the traditional Leninist model.

As we have seen, within the Bolshevik Petrograd organization at all levels in 1917 there was continuing free and lively discussion and debate over the most basic theoretical and tactical issues. Leaders who differed with the majority were at liberty to fight for their views, and not infrequently Lenin was the loser in these struggles.

THE FACT that the SWP-Britain adheres to Leninist principles is not by itself a defense against mistakes or bureaucratic tendencies.

There is nothing wrong with making mistakes. The problem comes in an organization that refuses to acknowledge, discuss or rectify them. As Lenin noted in *Left Wing Communism*, "Frankly acknowledging a mistake, ascertaining the reasons for it, analyzing the conditions that have led up to it, and thrashing out the means of its rectification--that is the hallmark of a serious party."

Granted, the SWP is not a mass, vanguard party in the Leninist sense. If by vanguard, we understand, as summarized by the late Duncan Hallas, "an organized layer of thousands of workers, by hand and by brain, firmly rooted amongst their fellow workers and with a shared consciousness of the necessity for socialism and the way to achieve it," then no such party exists anywhere in the world today. What does exist are organizations that aspire to build one,

or to be part of a process that leads to building one.

The SWP, with its membership numbering in the low thousands, is probably the largest revolutionary organization in the English-speaking world. But it is not close to being a party embracing the working-class vanguard--for a host of reasons, not least because the organization, combativeness and class consciousness of the working class, in Britain as elsewhere, are nowhere near the stage of development where the constituent elements of such a vanguard could clearly emerge.

When we talk, therefore, of drawing lessons from the Bolshevik tradition, there must be a strong sense of humility and recognition of the enormity of the tasks, compared to the puniness of our resources, and a realistic assessment of where we stand, if we are to avoid falling into what a leading member of the SWP once called "toy Bolshevism."