

"World Revolution": another confused group

Recent years have seen the emergence of groups who recognise that by socialism Marx meant a society in which goods would no longer be produced for sale and in which people would no longer work for wages. They have not, however, acknowledged that the Socialist Party of Great Britain has been pointing this out for over seventy years. In fact they have some harsh things to say about us. The journal *World Revolution*, for instance, which styles itself "the British group of the International Communist Current" is on record as describing us as "a completely degenerate bourgeois organisation which can only play a counter-revolutionary role within the working class" and as "a parliamentary leftist sect renowned for their Menshevism" (*WR3*). Recently, however, they seemed to have had second thoughts and have upgraded us from "a completely degenerate bourgeois" organisation to a "confused proletarian" one:

"The SPGB has survived since 1904 as a proletarian organisation. While its rigid sectarianism from the beginning tended to inhibit any real contribution to the clarification of the tasks of the working class, it nonetheless stood against both world wars, attacking them as capitalist wars in which the working class had no interest, and denouncing anti-fascism for the anti-working class movement it was. The SPGB also recognises Russia and China as state capitalist, and sees parties of the left and extreme left as parties of state capitalism. But against these class positions it also holds to the view that the working class can only come to power through Parliament and that it can defend itself through trade unions. It is even confused about who the working class is – for example, it sees the repressive arms of the state, the police, as members of the working class simply because they are paid wages" (*WR11*).

The so-called "International Communist Current" is an organisation with supporters in North America and a number of European countries, centred on the French journal *Révolution Internationale* which has tried to combine the Italian and German "leftwing communist" traditions, both dogmatically anti-parliamentary, attacked by Lenin in 1921 in his pamphlet *Leftwing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*.

WR holds that capitalism is, and has been since the first world war, in a state of economic collapse due to its inability to find new markets on which to sell its products at a profit. This view is based on an uncritical acceptance of the analysis made by Rosa Luxemburg in her book *The Accumulation of Capital* first published in 1913. We are told: "As Rosa Luxemburg showed, surplus value cannot be realised within the context of a purely capitalist economy" (*WR1*).

Rosa Luxemburg did indeed try to demonstrate this, but her argument was based on a simple fallacy. According to her, under "pure" capitalism (an economy where there are only capitalists and wage workers) market demand was determined by consumption (what the workers spend on consumer goods plus what the capitalists spend on consumer goods). If the capitalists were to consume all their surplus value, so her argument ran, there would be no problem, but as soon as they re-invest a part of it – which, the accumulation of capital, is after all the purpose of production under capitalism – market demand is no longer equal to what has been produced. For, the consumption of the capitalists having been reduced, so, according to Luxemburg, has market demand. The result, she concluded, was that there was nobody to buy the products in which the re-invested profits were embodied (new machinery, raw materials and consumer goods for the extra workers taken on).

This argument makes accumulation impossible under "pure" capitalism and Luxemburg did not shrink from this conclusion. In fact it led her to the basic theme of her book: that for capital accumulation to take place there must be non-capitalist areas to buy the part of the surplus product not consumed by the capitalists. It followed for her that capitalism would collapse at the point when there were no more non-capitalist areas left in the world. It is *WR*'s contention that precisely this collapse began to occur at about the time of the first world war.

Luxemburg had the intellectual honesty to admit that this theory conflicted with the rough notes Marx had made at the end of Volume II of *Capital* which implied that long-term growth (accumulation) was possible under "pure" capitalism. She therefore tried to show where Marx had gone wrong, but only

succeeded in exposing her own utter confusion about economics. She made the silly mistake of assuming that the level of market demand was determined exclusively by consumption (the spending of workers and capitalists on consumer goods) whereas in fact it is determined by consumption *plus* investment (capitalist spending on new means of production). Thus, when a part of the surplus value is re-invested rather than consumed, market demand is not reduced; it is merely re-arranged: what the capitalists formerly spent on consumer goods they now spend on means of production. Marx had made no mistake.

Of course, to say that capitalism could in theory exist without external non-capitalist markets is not to say that it always has done. External markets did play a key role in the birth and early growth of capitalism. Similarly, to say that there is no permanent underconsumption built-in to the capitalist system is not to say that there is therefore always a smooth crisis-free accumulation of capital. Far from it. Accumulation under capitalism proceeds by fits and starts, but these crises are caused by other reasons than underconsumption: by disproportions between the different branches of production leading to a fall in the rate of profit or, at times, to a temporary retraction of the market demand for consumer goods. Finally, to deny that capitalism is in a state of collapse through inability to find new external markets is not at all to deny that, since about the turn of the century, it has been a reactionary, "decadent" system with no further positive role to play in the history of mankind. By that time, it had already built up the material basis for a world socialist society and so had fulfilled its historic role.

According to *WR* theory, the period after the first world war was one of imminent "proletarian revolution" sparked off by the collapse of capitalism. In fact, however, capitalism was not collapsing nor were the workers revolutionary in any meaningful sense of the term, that is, imbued with socialist understanding. They were merely discontented with the terrible conditions they had to endure. A minority were indeed prepared to take violent action to try to rectify the situation, but this did not mean they were revolutionary in the sense of wanting and understanding socialism. The great majority of workers, however, as the results of elections held in Britain, France and Germany at the time showed, remained loyal to the political parties which openly upheld capitalism, including by now the Labour and Social Democratic parties.

Lenin too made the mistake of assuming that a socialist revolution in the West was imminent. His justification for the Bolshevik seizure of power in November 1917 was that it was the first step in the world proletarian revolution, a breakthrough by the working class where the link in the imperialist chain was weakest, to be followed fairly rapidly by revolutions in the other countries of Europe and in particular in Germany. In reality the Bolsheviks' coming to power was nothing of the sort, but was rather the seizure of power by a determined group in the conditions of chaos following the collapse of the Tsarist State under the impact of the war. Certainly, the Bolsheviks claimed to be socialists, but their support amongst the workers had been built up not for socialism but on the slogans "Peace, Bread and Land". Once in power they never had any choice but to develop capitalism in Russia which they proceeded to do in the form of state capitalism as Lenin was to frankly admit. Thus their *coup d'état* was essentially only a point in the process of the development of capitalism in Russia, Russia's equivalent of the French bourgeois revolution of 1798 or rather of the coming to power of Robespierre and the Jacobins in 1793.

WR, however, and the "International Communist Current", reject this view and proclaim that the Bolshevik seizure of power was a "proletarian revolution" which later "degenerated" into the state capitalism we see in Russia today:

"Its [the Bolshevik Party's] coming to power in October was one of the highest moments of the proletarian revolution" (*WR1*).

"With the recognition of the proletarian character of the October Revolution must come the realisation that the Bolshevik party . . . was a proletarian party of the revolutionary wave" (*International Review* No.3, p. 1).

The fact that *WR* regards the Bolshevik seizure of power as a "proletarian revolution" and the Bolshevik vanguard party as (at that time) a "proletarian party" reveals a lot about *their own conception of majority*,

conscious revolution (as *WR* claims), yet points to the Bolshevik coup (where an unconscious majority was manipulated by a conscious minority as in all previous bourgeois revolutions) as an example of the sort of revolution they have in mind, then their claim, or their understanding of its implications, must be open to serious question. That, despite what they say, they don't really stand for a majority conscious revolution will be confirmed when we examine their attitude to Parliament and elections.

WR is vehemently opposed to Parliament describing it as a "circus" and us as "parliamentary cretins" for saying that the working class can make some use of it. They favour instead "workers councils" in which their organisation would play a "vanguard" role. Once again this results from the fascination the Bolsheviks have for them.

Tsarist Russia was a political autocracy which did not permit the organisation of normal political parties or trade unions. Thus when it collapsed in March 1917 there were no mass parties or trade unions, or even local government bodies, through which the workers and soldiers could express their views. To fill this gap they formed make-shift representative bodies called "soviets" (which is merely the Russian word for "council") as they had done before in 1905. The fact that these bodies were make-shift without any formal democratic structure (though there is no reason to believe that they were not more or less representative till the Bolshevik coup) made it easier for them to be manipulated by a determined minority such as the Bolsheviks were.

Lenin cynically proclaimed these councils as a superior form of democracy to Parliament just because their unstructured nature had made it easier for a minority calling itself revolutionary to come to power by manipulating them. *WR* has inherited this tradition and has not entirely freed itself from the Bolshevik tactic of organising as a "vanguard" to manipulate the "workers councils" they want set up.

On the other hand, socialists reject *all* forms of minority action to attempt to establish socialism, which can only be established by the working class when the immense majority have come to want and understand it. Without a socialist working class, there can be no socialism. The establishment of socialism can only be the conscious majority, and therefore democratic, act of a socialist-minded working class.

In these circumstances the easiest and surest way for such a socialist majority to gain control of political power in order to establish socialism is to use the existing electoral machinery to send a majority of mandated socialist delegates to the various parliaments of the world. *This* is why we advocate using Parliament; not to try to reform capitalism (the only way Parliaments have been used up till now, which has inevitably failed to do anything for the working class since capitalism simply cannot be reformed to work for their benefit), but for the *single revolutionary purpose* of abolishing capitalism and establishing socialism by converting the means of production and distribution into the common property of the whole of society.

No doubt, at the same time, the working class will also have organised itself, at the various places of work, in order to keep production going, but nothing can be done here until the machinery of coercion which is the state has been taken out of the hands of the capitalist class by *political* action.

In the passage from WR11 quoted at the beginning of this article we are criticised for saying that the working class "can defend itself through trade unions". We do indeed say this. The existing trade unions are certainly not perfect – they are bureaucratic, they often collaborate with employers and governments, they engage in reformist politics – but at the moment, given the existing low level of consciousness among the working class, they are all workers have to defend themselves. Actually, we do not support the existing trade unions as such; what we say is that we are in favour of workers organising democratically and taking industrial action to defend their wages and conditions, and where possible improve them, against the encroachment of capital, an activity that has in the past sometimes brought them into conflict with the existing trade unions.

And it is not socialists who are "confused about who the working class is". We say that the working class is composed of all those who are excluded from ownership and control of the means of production and who are consequently forced, in order to live, to sell their mental and physical energies for a wage or

salary, *irrespective of the job they do*. The working class thus includes office workers and civil servants as well as factory workers and miners and, yes, policemen and members of the armed forces. Indeed, it is partly because we know that the state machine is manned largely by members of the working class that we are confident that the socialist working class majority will be able to establish socialism peacefully. For, when socialist ideas begin to spread among the working class it is most unlikely that those in uniform will remain unaffected. When a majority of workers generally are socialists, so will most of their fellow workers in the armed forces be.

(*Socialist Standard*, August 1980)