

Anyone for the vanguard?

This month the SWP holds its Conference but it won't be like the Conference of a working class organisation, with delegates, resolutions and contested elections. The SWP is not that kind of organisation. As a Leninist vanguard it is a top-down organisation controlled by its leaders, not its members.

Power in the SWP is in the hands of a small Central Committee whose members are all full-time officials of the organisation. Nominally the Central Committee is elected by the Conference but in practice it is a self-perpetuating body whose membership is renewed by cooptation.

What happens is that the outgoing Central Committee proposes its own slate of candidates for the incoming committee. This allows them to continue in office as long as they like, while being able to exclude any of their number who may have become awkward and to include any promising leadership material they have spotted and consider worthy of elevation to their ranks.

The rulebook does allow Conference delegates to vote against, but this never happens. One disillusioned SWPer has complained:

“Have you ever had a vote on who should be the leader of the SWP or on the Central Committee? The way this is decided on at SWP conference is very dubious. You're given a list of the new proposed CC and asked whether you agree or disagree. I've never heard of anyone not agreeing!” (*Republican Marxist Bulletin*, Nov-Dec 1992).

So the official list is always rubber-stamped. Just like in Russia under Brezhnev and in the late unlamented Communist Party. This is how Bob Darke, who was a CP borough councillor in Hackney in Stalin's day, writing in 1952 described the way the local borough Secretariat was chosen:

“Each year the existing Secretariat draws up its own panel of names for the new Secretariat. It does this after it has consulted with the London District Committee (which is the co-ordinating authority of all branches in the London area). The Secretariat is often so satisfied with its work during the past year that it suggests that it should be re-elected en bloc. Of course, the London District may not agree, in which case changes will be made in the list. The panel is then placed before the aggregate meeting and comrades are invited to vote on it. They have absolute freedom of choice. They may vote Yes or No. Of course No would be a wasted vote, for there is no alternative to the panel. They are entitled to reject the suggested panel out of hand and suggest an entirely new one. I say they are at liberty to do this – but I have never known of it being done” (*The Communist Technique in Britain*, page 23).

The likeness is not accidental and explodes the SWP's claim that Lenin did not lead to Stalin. The fact is that the emergence of a self-perpetuating leadership is an inevitable consequence – indeed, is one of the aims – of Leninist organisational principles.

The SWP Conference is completely dominated by the Central Committee which, quite literally, sets the agenda. Once again, on paper branches have the right to put down resolutions but are strongly discouraged from doing so:

“Branches can submit resolutions if they wish, and these may be voted on. But in recent years

the practice of sending resolutions to conference has virtually ceased” (*Socialist Review*, September 1983).

What the delegates discuss are not resolutions coming from the membership organised in branches, but a report submitted by the Central Committee on the political “perspectives”. This is a document of pamphlet length and is the main item on the agenda. It is discussed section by section; at the end of each discussion a committee is elected to draw up a report which the delegates then vote on. This is said to make resolutions unnecessary:

“The advantage of this procedure is that conference does not have to proceed by resolution like a trade union conference”.

This is not the only trade union procedure that the SWP rejects:

“Delegates should not be mandated . . . Mandating is a trade union practice, with no place in a revolutionary party.”

The idea of deciding some important issue by holding a ballot of the whole membership is equally obnoxious to the SWP. In the first volume of his hagiography of Lenin, SWP leader Tony Cliff wrote:

“In January 1907, Lenin went so far as to argue for the institution of a referendum of all party members on the issues facing the party – certainly a suggestion which ran counter to the whole idea of democratic centralism” (T. Cliff, *Lenin*, Volume I: Building the Party, p. 280).

It certainly did, but Lenin only proposed this because at that time he didn’t control the Central Committee.

Mandating delegates, voting on resolutions and membership ballots are not just trade union practices; they are democratic practices for ensuring that the members of an organisation control that organisation – and as such key procedures in any organisation genuinely seeking socialism. Socialism can only be a fully democratic society in which everybody will have an equal say in the ways things are run. This means that it can only come about democratically, both in the sense of being the expressed will of the working class and in the sense of the working class being organised democratically – without leaders, but with mandated delegates – to achieve it.

In rejecting these procedures what the SWP is saying is that the working class should not organise itself democratically, but should instead follow a self-appointed, undemocratically organised elite. This is pure Lenin. According to him, left to themselves workers were only capable of developing what he contemptuously called a “trade union consciousness”; to go beyond this they had to be led by professional revolutionaries taking orders from an all-powerful centre. This is the model the SWP is following.

So, if you have a low assessment, like Lenin, of the intellectual and organisational abilities of your class, join the SWP! If you want to be in an organisation where you’ll never mandate a delegate, put forward a resolution for conference or vote in a ballot of members, join the SWP! If you are prepared to be a follower in a leadership-run organisation, join the SWP! Otherwise, like any self-respecting trade unionist let alone anyone who wants socialism, stay out of it.

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