

**the struggle
for
self-management**

**AN OPEN LETTER
TO I.S. COMRADES**

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September 27, 1968.

Dear Comrades,

It is remarkable how few socialists seem to recognize the connection between the structure of their organization and the type of 'socialist' society it might help bring about.

If the revolutionary organization is seen as the means and socialist society as the end, one might expect people with an elementary understanding of dialectics to recognize the relation between the two. Means and ends are mutually dependent. They constantly influence each other. The means are, in fact, a partial implementation of the end, whereas the end becomes modified by the means adopted.

One could almost say 'tell me your views concerning the structure and function of the revolutionary organization and I'll tell you what the society you will help create will be like'. Or conversely 'give me your definition of socialism and I'll tell you what your views on the revolutionary organization are likely to be'.

We see socialism as a society based on self-management in every branch of social life. Its basis would be workers' management of production exercised through Workers Councils. Accordingly we conceive of the revolutionary organization as one which incorporates self-management in its structure and abolishes within its own ranks the separation between the functions of decision-making and execution. The revolutionary organization should propagate these principles in every area of social life.

Others may have different conceptions of socialism. They may have different views on the aims and structure of the revolutionary organization. They must state what these are clearly, openly and unambiguously. They owe it not only to the workers and students but to themselves.

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An example of haziness in the definition of socialism (and of its repercussions concerning revolutionary organization) is to be found in the material published by the central bodies of International Socialism (I.S.) in preparation for the Bi-annual Conference of September 1968.

In the duplicated 'Statement of Basic Principles' (I.S. Constitution) we find that I.S. struggles for 'workers' control'. But we also find that 'planning, under workers' control, demands nationalization'. These are the only references, in the document, to the structure of the socialist society towards whose creation all of I.S. activity is directed.

How, precisely, does I.S. conceive of working class 'control'? What does 'nationalization' mean? How does I.S. relate it to 'workers control'? Does the working class implement its 'control' through the mediation of a political party? Or of trade union officials? Or of a technocracy? Or through workers councils?

Are those who formulated the I.S. Constitution aware that 'nationalization' means precisely relegating authority of decision-making on industrial policy to a group of state officials? Don't they realise that the struggle of the French students and workers for 'auto-gestion' (self-management) renders 'nationalization' irrelevant? Apparently they do not. In the analysis of the French events ('The Struggle Continues') written by T. Cliff and I. Birchall (and produced as an official I.S. publication) the relation between self-management and nationalization is not discussed at all.

Why should a national federation of Workers Councils (composed of elected and revocable delegates of regional Councils) allow any other group in society to wield ultimate authority in relation to all aspects of production?

In political terms the question can be posed thus: does I.S. stand for the policy of 'all power to the Workers Councils'? Or does it stand for the policy of 'all power to the Revolutionary Party'? It is no use evading the issue by saying that in France no workers councils existed. When this is the case, it is the duty of revolutionaries to conduct propaganda for their creation.

In Russia, in 1917, Workers Councils ('soviets') did exist. On July 4, 1917, Lenin raised the slogan 'all power to the soviets'. He ended his article with the words: 'things are moving by fits and starts towards a point where power will be transferred to the soviets, which is what our Party called for long ago'.(1) Yet two months later, on September 12, he wrote: 'The Bolsheviks, having obtained a majority in the soviets of workers and soldiers deputies of both capitals can and must take state power into their own hands'.(2)

However one analyses Lenin's transition, in the context of Russia in 1917, from a policy of 'all power to the soviets' to a policy of 'all power to the Bolshevik Party', one must recognize that his choice was a fundamental one, whose implications for Britain in 1968 cannot be evaded.

(1) Lenin, Collected Works, vol. 25, p. 154.

(2) Lenin, Collected Works, vol. 26, p. 19.

The 'leading' (i.e. decision-making) bodies in I.S. are very careful not to state explicitly that, like Lenin, they believe that the Party must take power on behalf of the class. This principle however runs through the entire Cliff-Birchall analysis of the French events. Their analysis is, in fact, tailored to fit this principle.

We say to these comrades: if you believe that the working class itself cannot 'seize power' (but that the Revolutionary Party must do it on behalf of the class), please say so openly and defend your views.

Let us put to you our own views on the subject. Political 'power' is fundamentally little more than the right to take and impose decisions in matters of social production, administration, etc. This authority is not to be confused with expertise. The experts give advice, they do not make the decisions. Today, during the development of the self-management revolution, it is precisely the authority of decision-making in relation to the management of production (whether the means of production be formally in the hands of private bosses or of the state) that is being challenged. The challenge is being repeated in all branches of social life.

Those who think in terms of 'seizing power' unwittingly accept that a political bureaucracy, separate from the producers themselves, and concentrating in its hands the authority of decision-making on fundamental issues of social production must be a permanent social institution. They believe its form (the bourgeois 'state apparatus') has to be changed. But they refuse to question the need for such a social institution. They want to capture political power and use it for allegedly different purposes. They do not consider its abolition to be on the agenda.

As for us, we believe that once self-management in production has been achieved, 'political power' as a social institution will lose both its social function and justification. To speak of 'workers' control' and of 'seizing political power' is to confuse a new structure of society (the rule of the Workers Councils) with one of the by-products of the previous form of class society, which was based on withholding from the workers the right to manage.

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Comrades Cliff and Birchall fail to recognize the specific, new features of the May events in France. They fail to explain why the students succeeded in inspiring 10 million workers. 'The student demonstrations created an environment in which people were free to coin their own slogans' ('The Struggle Continues', p.17.) What slogans? The two most important were 'Contestation' and 'Auto-gestion' (self-management). What was being contested? What does self-management mean? How are the two slogans related to each other? Not a word on all this. What we do find however is the important statement (ibid, p.18) that 'when a worker went to the Sorbonne he was recognized as a hero. Within Renault he was only a thing. In the University he became a man'.

Comrades, you should seek to clarify this assessment (with which we agree). Please tell us what was the mysterious element in the 'environment' which transformed a man into a thing and vice-versa? Are we wrong in assuming that a man feels like a 'thing' when he has to live as an executant of social decisions which he cannot influence, whereas he feels like a 'man' when he lives under social circumstances which he has shaped by his own decisions (or in whose creation he was an equal partner)?

If this is really your opinion, why not say it in so many words?

But if this is really what you believe how could your Political Committee suggest an organizational regulation saying that:

'4. Branches must accept directives from the Centre, unless they fundamentally disagree with them, in which case they should try to accord with them while demanding an open debate on the matter.'

(Perspectives for I.S., September 12, 1968)

Isn't the Political Committee attempting to transform I.S. members from 'men' into 'things'? Isn't the attempt to limit the right of rank-and-file I.S. members to initiate political decisions - while democratically permitting them to debate (not overrule!) the directives of the Centre, after having carried them out - an indication of an ideological disease more serious than being out of touch with the spirit of the young workers and students? If I.S. is to play a significant role in the revolution this regulation must be defeated, not only organizationally but also ideologically.

In the last chapter of their analysis of the French events, comrades Cliff and Birchall quote Trotsky to the effect that 'unity in action of all sections of the proletariat, and simultaneity of demonstration under a single common slogan (Are these really essential? Did they ever exist in history?) can only be achieved if there is a genuine concentration of leadership in the hands of responsible (to whom?) central and local bodies, stable in their composition (!) and in their attitude to their political line'. ('The Struggle Continues' p.77)

This is to confuse the technical and the political aspects of a real problem. Coordination is essential and may require centralisation. But the function of an administrative centre should not include the imposition of political decisions.

Trotsky's argument (and Cliff's) sound almost stalinist. A centre, 'stable in its composition', concentrates in its hands the authority of political decision-making. 'The branches must accept directives from the Centre'. The Party 'leads' the working class and 'seizes power' on its behalf. Workers are 'summoned' (ibid, p.78) to an 'open revolutionary assault on capitalism.' From this it is but a short step to Trotsky's statement that 'the statutes should express the leadership's organized distrust of the members, a distrust manifesting itself in vigilant control from above over the Party'. (3)

This approach reveals a very definite view concerning the role of the Centre in relation to the Party and of the Party in relation to the class. But it is wrong to identify this view with Stalinism. It preceded Stalin, Lenin and Marx. As a matter of fact, it has been part of ruling class ideology for centuries.

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Cliff and Birchall mobilise every possible argument to support the doctrine of 'Centre leads Party, Party leads class'. They write: 'Facing the strictly centralised and disciplined power of the capitalists, there must be no less centralised and disciplined a combat organization of the proletariat'. (ibid, p.77) Yet two pages earlier they had admitted that 'the 14th July 1789 revolution was a spontaneous act of the masses. The same was true of the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the February 1917 Revolution'. (ibid., p.75) In other words they admit that two of the most centralised regimes in history were overthrown by masses that were not led by any party, let alone a centralised one. How do they reconcile these facts with their assertion that 'only a centralised party can overthrow centralised power'?

The conscious factor in changing history, embodied in revolutionary organizations, can play a significant role in shaping the new social structure. However after the Russian experience it is clear that this 'conscious factor' must develop its own self-consciousness. It must recognize the connection between its own structure and practice - and the type of socialism it will help achieve.

Writing in 1904 Lenin took sides unequivocally for 'bureaucracy' (as against democracy) and for 'centralism' (as against autonomy). He wrote: 'Bureaucracy versus democracy is the same thing as centralism versus autonomism. It is the organizational principle of revolutionary political democracy as opposed to the organizational principle of the opportunists of Social Democracy. The latter want to proceed from the bottom upwards and, consequently, wherever possible and to the extent that it is possible, it supports autonomism and "democracy" which may (by the over-zealous) be carried as far as anarchism. The former proceeds from the top, and advocates an extension of the rights and power of the Centre in respect of the parts'. (4)

With all due allowance to the objective factors which contributed to the degeneration of the Russian Revolution, these ideas (the conscious, subjective factor) must also be stressed, certainly in 1968.

We can only add here what Rosa Luxemburg, answering Lenin, said in 1904: 'Let us speak plainly. Historically, the errors committed by a truly revolutionary working class movement are infinitely more fruitful

(4) Lenin, 'One Step forward, Two steps back', Selected Works, vol. II, pp. 447-448.

and valuable than the infallibility of the cleverest Central Committee'.(5)

Are these words less relevant in 1968 than they were in 1904?

Today in Britain the danger is not that future society will be shaped in the image of a bureaucratic revolutionary organization based on 'genuine concentration of leadership in the hands of responsible central and local bodies, stable in their composition', organizations in which 'branches must accept directives from the Centre', etc. The danger is rather to such organizations themselves. They will cease to be relevant to the social self-management revolution now developing. Before long they will be identified as just other 'centre-managed' political bureaucracies, to be swept aside. This is the fate now threatening I.S., should the Political Committee's recommendations be accepted.

We wish all I.S. members a useful Conference and a serious discussion that will help them clarify their ideas about socialism, workers' management and the structure and function of the revolutionary organization.

(5) R. Luxemburg, Leninism or Marxism, Ann Arbor Paperback (1961) p.108.

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AS WE SEE IT

1. Throughout the world, the vast majority of people have no control whatsoever over the decisions that most deeply and directly affect their lives. They sell their labour power while others who own or control the means of production, accumulate wealth, make the laws and use the whole machinery of the State to perpetuate and reinforce their privileged positions.

2. During the past century the living standards of working people have improved. But neither these improved living standards, nor the nationalization of the means of production, nor the coming to power of parties claiming to represent the working class have basically altered the status of the worker as worker. Nor have they given the bulk of mankind much freedom outside of production. East and West, capitalism remains an inhuman type of society where the vast majority are bossed at work, and manipulated in consumption and leisure. Propaganda and policemen, prisons and schools, traditional values and traditional morality all serve to reinforce the power of the few and to convince or coerce the many into acceptance of a brutal, degrading and irrational system. The 'Communist' world is not communist and the 'Free' world is not free.

3. The trade unions and the traditional parties of the left started in business to change all this. But they have come to terms with the existing patterns of exploitation. In fact they are now essential if exploiting society is to continue working smoothly. The unions act as middlemen in the labour market. The political parties use the struggles and aspirations of the working class for their own ends. The degeneration of working class organizations, itself the result of the failure of the revolutionary movement, has been a major factor in creating working class apathy, which in turn has led to the further degeneration of both parties and unions.

4. The trade unions and political parties cannot be reformed, 'captured', or converted into instruments of working class emancipation. We don't call however for the proclamation of new unions, which in the conditions of today would suffer a similar fate to the old ones. Nor do we call for militants to tear up their union cards. Our aims are simply that the workers themselves should decide on the objectives of their struggles and that the control and organization of these struggles should remain firmly in their own hands. The forms which this self-activity of the working class may take will vary considerably from country to country and from industry to industry. Its basic content will not.

5. Socialism is not just the common ownership and control of the means of production and distribution. It means equality, real freedom, reciprocal recognition and a radical transformation in all human relations. It is 'man's positive self-consciousness'. It is man's understanding of his environment and of himself, his domination over his work and over such social institutions as he may need to

create. These are not secondary aspects, which will automatically follow the expropriation of the old ruling class. On the contrary they are essential parts of the whole process of social transformation, for without them no genuine social transformation will have taken place.

6. A socialist society can therefore only be built from below. Decisions concerning production and work will be taken by workers' councils composed of elected and revocable delegates. Decisions in other areas will be taken on the basis of the widest possible discussion and consultation among the people as a whole. This democratisation of society down to its very roots is what we mean by 'workers' power'.

7. Meaningful action, for revolutionaries, is whatever increases the confidence, the autonomy, the initiative, the participation, the solidarity, the equalitarian tendencies and the self-activity of the masses and whatever assists in their demystification. Sterile and harmful action is whatever reinforces the passivity of the masses, their apathy, their cynicism, their differentiation through hierarchy, their alienation, their reliance on others to do things for them and the degree to which they can therefore be manipulated by others - even by those allegedly acting on their behalf.

8. No ruling class in history has ever relinquished its power without a struggle and our present rulers are unlikely to be an exception. Power will only be taken from them through the conscious, autonomous action of the vast majority of the people themselves. The building of socialism will require mass understanding and mass participation. By their rigid hierarchical structure, by their ideas and by their activities, both social-democratic and bolshevik types of organizations discourage this kind of understanding and prevent this kind of participation. The idea that socialism can somehow be achieved by an elite party (however 'revolutionary'), acting 'on behalf of' the working class is both absurd and reactionary.

9. We do not accept the view that by itself the working class can only achieve a trade union consciousness. On the contrary we believe that its conditions of life and its experiences in production constantly drive the working class to adopt priorities and values and to find methods of organization which challenge the established social order and established pattern of thought. These responses are implicitly socialist. On the other hand, the working class is fragmented, dispossessed of the means of communication, and its various sections are at different levels of awareness and consciousness. The task of the revolutionary organization is to help give proletarian consciousness an explicitly socialist content, to give practical assistance to workers in struggle and to help those in different areas to exchange experiences and link up with one another.

10. We do not see ourselves as yet another leadership, but merely as an instrument of working class action. The function of Solidarity is to help all those who are in conflict with the present authoritarian social structure, both in industry and in society at large, to generalize their experience, to make a total critique of their condition and of its causes, and to develop the mass revolutionary consciousness necessary if society is to be totally transformed.