

Internationalism after Stalinism

By Neville Alexander*

THE world market necessitates an international. The need for an international organisation of the working class arises from the fact of the international division of labour and of the existence of the world capitalist market. This much was established by Marx and Engels as long ago as the forties of the last century when they composed that treasury of modern philosophical thought. The German Ideology.* Were it not for the theoretical and strategic depredations of reformism during the last hundred years or so, this position would require no further discussion, especially in the era of globalisation where the dominance of trans-national corporations and the reality of international counter-revolution are evident beyond all doubt.

The failure of previous attempts to sustain international associations of the working class necessitates a careful review of the history of these attempts, on the one hand, and a thorough examination of the technological, ideological and organisational changes that characterise the present historical period, on the other hand. On the basis of such an analysis, new initiatives can be started and possibly sustained if all the converging and co-operating working-class and revolutionary socialist forces and elements remain committed to democratic practice both in theory and in day-to-day operations.

It is axiomatic and not worthy of further discussion that the survival of the human species in a world where the free development of all is dependent on the free development of each implies the destruction of the capitalist system. It is further abundantly obvious that most of the key problems with which we are confronted today cannot be resolved on the national scale. The threats to the biosphere through irresponsible profit-driven industrial and social pollution, the spectre of nuclear extinction, the spread of us yet incurable pandemic diseases such as AIDS, mass unemployment, mass poverty and hunger, as well as devastating recurrent civil wars, ethnic conflicts and international wars between two or more national states: all these are clearly beyond the control of any individual national state and the nature of the capitalist beast is such that it cannot

find a solution to this problem without committing systemicicide. Only the co-ordinated action of the international working class, i.e. of all those who have to earn their subsistence by selling their labour power, can bring an end to this system and establish the platform on which these and other problems afflicting the human species can be addressed with some hope of success.

Merely national, relatively isolated organisations of socialists cannot in the final analysis avoid the trap of national chauvinism. They are unable to generate a genuine internationalism which is based on the understanding that the working class is an international class by virtue of the fact that its capacity to work constitutes for the capitalist class a factor of production which is in the abstract (and, as we see ever more clearly, also in practice) not limited by national boundaries. Social democrats and other reformists see the world capitalist system as an aggregation of nationally bounded mini-systems and are, therefore, unable to get beyond the promotion of international solidarity. This is, in principle, no different from the kind of philanthropic sentiments associated, for example, with bourgeois pacifists. At times of extreme crisis, such noble sentiments are swept aside by the brute forces of nationalism, as we have seen in the course of two world wars and hundreds of others during this century alone. Without the ideological orientation towards international sectoral economic organisations of the working class and towards an international political organisation of the class, together with the systematic political education this entails, we are doomed to repeat on a regular basis the devastations of the past two hundred years of the dominance of the capitalist system.

Globalisation and the crisis of socialism

TODAY, two related developments compel us to adopt a creative approach to the designing of a strategy for the building of an international organisation of revolutionary socialists rooted in the mass revolutionary workers' parties. These are, first, the crisis of credibility of socialism in the aftermath of the collapse of the Stalinist version of so-called real socialism; the second is the phenomenon of globalisation, both as a technological and organisational



reality of the late 20th century and as the ideological hegemony of blatant dog-eat-dog capitalist economics, otherwise euphemistically called "neoliberalism".

The perceived "crisis of socialism" requires of us an honest evaluation of many unproblematised aspects of what are taken to be the philosophical and strategic-organisational *a priori* of Marxism. At another level, it also implies that revolutionary socialists have to understand the life-and-death necessity of maintaining and protecting the independence of revolutionary socialist and workers' parties from any state, no matter how progressive it might appear at any given moment. The disasters associated with the dependence of revolutionary movements on the former Soviet Union, on China, and even on Cuba, are burnt into the memory of all of us.

We have, for example, to re-examine Marx's famous dictum that there is no such thing as human nature (in itself). While the statement is true in the most abstract and general terms, it has to be viewed against the dominant ideological and structural dynamics of every epoch of production. In other words, "human nature" in a tribal, a feudal or a capitalist era is decidedly different but it also tends — within each such epoch — to be decidedly uniform. If it is in fact the case that such an average human nature can be identified for each such epoch, and I am not referring to anything as vague and limited in time as a *zeitgeist*, then, in my view, some of the assumptions of socialists about the infinite variability of the human psyche are naive, to say the least. I realise that I am treading on dangerous — *nota bene*, not holy — ground, but I believe that questions such as these have to be re-examined since they have a direct bearing on the

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strategy and tactics of revolutionary socialists everywhere in the world.

My own particular concern is with the path we have to plot in order to get to the formation of a genuinely internationalist organisation of the world working class. Particularly because of the totalitarian degeneration of the Third International, reinforced by the often quixotic attempts by sectarian groups to reincarnate that international as it was before 1929, it is simply not discussible today to suggest that an international party of revolutionary socialists should be the immediate objective of those who wish to work towards the establishment of such an organisation. It is our view in the Workers' Organisation for Socialist Action (WOSA) that revolutionary socialists the world over have to get back in principle to the situation that obtained on the eve of the establishment of the First International. This does not mean, of course, that we are starting from scratch. It does mean, however, that all revolutionary socialist and anti-capitalist forces have to be brought together in co-ordinated revolutionary action with a view to understanding the real differences in the manifestation at the national, sub-regional and regional levels of capitalist exploitation and oppression in the era of globalisation.

For while the capitalist mode of production has not changed, the capitalist world system today has many unimagined and unforeseen features and contradictions which cannot be derived from first principles and the manifestations of which usually have the effect of dividing the national strata of the working class as well as the international working class. We need do no more than point to the racist consequences of so-called illegal immigrant populations in the advanced capitalist countries and the related genocidal ethnic conflicts in less advanced or "third-world" capitalist countries.

A wheel without hub and spokes?

IMPERIALISM, neo-colonialism and the overriding fact of uneven development require that we find a practical organisational solution to the problems of disparity and real inequalities (of skills, resources, knowledge and information) which are such obvious features of the world socialist movement, taken as a whole. Hitherto, there has been a tendency towards what some comrades refer to as the "hub-and-spokes model" of an international. This refers to the historically attested fact that some, large or small, group of revolutionary socialists in some European (or, recently also, North American) metropolis creates "THE INTERNATIONAL", usually as a breakaway from some earlier version

of itself. This group then recruits individual, sometimes small groups of, intellectuals from one or other former British or French/Belgian colony (I am thinking of America here but the same is true by extension of other former colonial areas) who happen to be studying in the relevant metropolitan country at the time, and via them creates a "section" of the INTERNATIONAL in the relevant former colony. On a very few occasions, the etiology of such a "section" has been more organically related to real mass mobilisation in the former colony. Significantly, though, in most such cases known to me, the mass movement concerned has quickly disaffiliated from, or been kicked out of, the INTERNATIONAL concerned.

This slightly caricatured description of what has actually happened all too frequently is, needless to say, a travesty of what an international socialist organisation should look like. It is the reason, however, why we, in WOSA, consider that it is essential that any new initiative to establish an international political organisation of the working class and of revolutionary socialists will have to proceed differently and, above all, more cautiously. The fear of comrades who operate from "third world" countries of being treated paternalistically by comrades who are located in advanced capitalist countries is a very real one and is based on bitter experience. This is a very difficult and an extremely sensitive issue. There is, first of all, the brute fact of superior resources and a modern political culture which reaches back at least a century on the side of those who operate from the "North". On the other side, there is a real dependence and vulnerability but also a dignity and a pride born out of a liberated consciousness. It is clear that only an open, democratic discussion among equals, where there are no hidden agendas and where everyone is both educator and learner, will help us get over this hurdle. Not to face the facts of uneven development and to behave as though all wisdom and knowledge reside at the metropolitan "centre" is to play with fire and, in the end, to self-destruct.

We propose, therefore, that the first step should be to work for the establishment of an international Socialist movement which, by definition, will consist of co-ordinated action undertaken by nationally or regionally based organisations and parties. United-front global campaigns against the depredations of globalising capitalism such as the international debt, racism, gender inequality, unemployment, global pollution, etc., should constitute the testing ground for such a movement. Co-ordinated action based on mandates should gradually lead to more integrated decision-making procedures which could, in terms of lead-

ership styles and functions, eventually, lead to the replacement of a Co-ordinating Committee by a Central Committee. Whether and how this will take place should be left to the real movement of history rather than be the result of some organisational blueprint that is conceived of apart from the realities that determine the unique features of each participant area.

Organisation or party?

IHAVE used the term "Organisation" advisedly throughout this article. We believe that the notion of a World Party, even if it were ever to be realised, is premature and in any case fraught with the most serious dangers of totalitarian hubris. Quite apart from the question of the continued relevance of terminology such as "democratic centralism" and "vanguard party" at the level of national organisation, I believe that this discourse is not only inappropriate but in fact self-crippling at the level of national organisation. The order of complexity at the international level, the vastly different historical and cultural milieus from which the participant organisations and movements derive and, not least, the real problems of international communication via *lingua francas*, simply render this kind of discourse utterly absurd or make the weaker groups into rubber stamps of the more powerful at any given time.

We may well have to find other words (in English) to describe the kind of formation which will best capture the needs of this historical moment. What is not in doubt for me is that sticking religiously to the terminology and the discourse of the past in this regard is no different from the mortmain that prevents the progressive deployment of resources in the life sphere of the propertied classes.

Conclusion

WE are presently in the process of discussing these and other related ideas. It ought to be clear, therefore, that this is very much a work in progress, which is what Marxist scholarship should always be. For this reason, I do not apologise for the obvious incompleteness of some of the propositions I have put forward here. I believe that it is only through fearless debate and engagement among equal comrades dedicated to the same world view and to the same set of values that we can hope to enrich our understanding of the world we live in and of the tasks that we are expected to take on in our quest for a different world, one where the free development of all is determined by the free development of each.