

SOCIALISM AND DEMOCRACY

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Appendices

Appendix 3. Marxism and democracy - James P Cannon

Appendix 4. The movement of the majority - James P Cannon

Appendix 5. 1917 was a democratic revolution - Max Shachtman

Appendix 6. Lenin on Democracy and Dictatorship

Appendix 7. Democracy in the Russian Revolution - Leon Trotsky (1918)

Appendix 8. An Eyewitness Account of the Russian Revolution- Hal Draper

Appendix 1. Labour Party: the sham of "one member, one vote" - John Bloxam and John O'Mahony

Appendix 2. PR, democracy, and socialism - John O'Mahony

Appendix 7 and appendix 8, included here, were not in the printed version of January 1994. Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 are printed at the end because they are topical articles from a period in which Labour Party politics were very different from now.

MARXISM AND DEMOCRACY

By James P Cannon. This is an extract from Cannon's reply to a criticism of his court evidence in 1941.

Comrade Munis [1] is dissatisfied with our assertions at the trial that "we submit to the majority".

The Oehlerites also are scornful of this declaration and represent it as some kind of capitulatory repudiation of our principles in order to impress the jury. All these assumptions are without foundation. Our "submission to the majority" was not first revealed at the trial. We said it before the trial and continue to repeat it after the trial. It is a correct statement of our position because it conforms both to reality and necessity. Moreover, our Marxist teachers said it before us; we learned it from them.

What else can we do but "submit to the majority" if we are Marxists, and not Blanquists [3] or anarchist muddleheads? It is a timely occasion to probe into this question because we believe any ill-considered talk about some kind of mysterious "action", presumed to be open to us while we remain not only a minority, but a very small, numerically insignificant minority, can lead only to a dangerous disorientation of the party. An exposition of the Marxist position on this question can also be useful as an antidote for any remnants of the half-Blanquist tradition of the early years of the Comintern in America.

The pioneer communists in the United States (and not only here) heard of the Bolshevik victory in Russia long before they learned about the political method and propaganda Socialism and Democracy page 1

techniques whereby the Bolsheviks gained the mass support which made the seizure of power possible. Their first impressions were undoubtedly coloured by the capitalist press accounts which represented the revolution as a coup d'état engineered by a small group. This distorted conception was epitomised by the title given to the American edition of Trotsky's classic pamphlet *Terrorism and Communism*, which was published here by the party's publishing house in 1922 under the completely misleading title: *Dictatorship versus Democracy*. We took the "dictatorship", so to speak, and generously handed over to the bourgeoisie all claim to "democracy".

This was far too big a concession, perhaps pardonable in a young movement lacking adequate knowledge about the democratic essence of the Bolshevik program, but by far out of date today. The bourgeoisie have always tried to picture communism as a "criminal conspiracy" in order to alienate the workers who are profoundly democratic in their sentiments. That was the aim once again in the Minneapolis trial. It was our task at the trial to go out of our way to refute this misrepresentation and emphasise the democratic basis of our program; not in order to placate our enemies and persecutors, as is assumed, but in order to reveal the truth to our friends, the American workers.

We cannot eat our cake and have it too. We must either "submit" to the majority and confine ourselves to propaganda designed to win over the majority—or, we must seize power, more correctly, try to seize power and break the neck of the party, by minority "action".

Marxist authority is clear and conclusive in choosing between these alternatives. When we took our stand in court regarding “submission” to the majority we were not “folding our arms” and making “opportunistic” statements of “passivity in the face of the imperialist war”, as we are accused. Nothing of the sort. The testimony states, repeatedly, and with sufficient emphasis, that, while “submitting to the majority”—that is, making no minority insurrections or putsches—we are organising, speaking, writing, and “explaining”; in other words, carrying on propaganda with the object of winning over the majority to our program, which is the program of social revolution.

Neither were we simply trying to “make an honourable impression on the jury without taking into consideration that we should talk for the masses”. To be sure we did not stupidly disregard the jury which held the fate of twenty-eight comrades, not to mention the legality of the party, in its hands. But we were speaking also, and especially, “for the masses”. We testified primarily for publication. It was our deliberate aim to convince those who would read the testimony in printed form of the truth that the proletarian movement which we aspire to lead is a democratic movement, and not a “conspiracy”, as the prosecutor and the whole of the capitalist press would picture it, and as loose talkers would unconsciously aid them to so picture it; not a scheme to transfer power from one clique to another, but a movement of the majority in the interest of the majority.

In addition, it may as well be said candidly that this testimony was also deliberately designed as an educational shock to such members and sympathisers of our movement as may still, at this late day, be dabbling with the idea of a shorter cut to socialism by some mysterious prescription for “action”.

The Marxist authorities have all spoken in one voice on this question.

The Communist Manifesto, the first and the most fundamental statement of the principles of scientific socialism, defined the proletarian movement of emancipation, in contradistinction to all others in history, as follows:

All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority.[27]

The communist political method and strategy follow ineluctably from this basic premise. Nowhere and never have the authoritative representatives of Marxism formulated the question otherwise. The Marxists aim to make the social transformation with the majority and not for the majority. The irreconcilable struggle of Marx and Engels against the Blanquists revolved around this pivot.

In 1895, summing up the experience of fifty years, Engels wrote, in his Introduction to Marx’s Class Struggles in France:

The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of the unconscious Socialism and Democracy page 2

masses, is past. Where it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organisations, the masses themselves must also be in it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake, what they are going in for, body and soul. The history of the last fifty years has taught us that.

The successors of Marx and Engels followed in their footsteps. The experiences of the Russian Revolution confirmed in life the basic premise of the founders of scientific socialism. It was precisely because Lenin and Trotsky had assimilated this concept into their flesh and blood that they knew how to concentrate their whole activity on propaganda to win over the majority, biding their time till they gained the majority, and resorting to “action” only when they felt assured of the support of the majority.

What did they do in the meantime? They “submitted to the majority”. What else could they do? Lenin explained it a hundred times, precisely. In those months and days when the Bolsheviks were consciously preparing the struggle for power. In his April Theses on The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution, published in Pravda on April 20, 1917, a few days after his return to Russia, Lenin wrote:

As long as we are in the minority we carry on the work of criticising and exposing errors and at the same time we preach the necessity of transferring the entire state power to the Soviets of Workers’ Deputies, so that the people may overcome their mistakes by experience.

A few days later, he returned to this question, explaining the reason for this attitude, the reason being that “we are not Blanquists, we are Marxists”. On April 22 he wrote:

To become a power the class conscious workers must win the majority to their side. As long as no violence is used against the people there is no other road to power. We are not Blanquists, we do not stand for the seizure of power by a minority. We are Marxists, we stand for proletarian class struggle against petty-bourgeois intoxication, against chauvinist-defencism, phrase-mongering, and dependence on the bourgeoisie.

Not once or twice, but repeatedly and almost continually, so that neither friend nor foe could possibly misunderstand him, in the months directly preceding the October Revolution, Lenin limited the Bolshevik task to the propaganda work of “criticising”, “exposing errors” and “advocating” in order to “win the majority to their side”. This was not camouflage for the enemy but education for the workers’ vanguard. He explained it theoretically as we, following him, tried to explain it in popular language at the trial.

Again, in April 1917, refuting the accusations of Plekhanov and others who accused the Bolsheviks of “anarchism, Blanquism, and so forth”, Lenin once again explained the question, for the benefit, as he said, of “those who really want to think and learn”. Into a few paragraphs he compresses a profound thesis which every member of the workers’ vanguard ought to learn by heart. He wrote:

In my theses, I absolutely insured myself against skipping over the peasant movement, which has not outlived itself, or the petty-bourgeois movement in general, against and playing at “seizure of power” by a workers’ government,

against any kind of Blanquist adventurism; for I pointedly referred to the experience of the Paris Commune. And this experience, as we know, and as Marx proved at length in 1871 and Engels in 1891, absolutely excludes Blanquism, absolutely ensures the direct, immediate and unquestionable rule of the majority and the activity of the masses only to the extent that the majority itself acts consciously.

In the theses, I very definitely reduced the question to one of a struggle for influence within the Soviets of Workers', Agricultural Laborers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies. To leave no shadow of doubt on this score, I twice emphasised in the theses the need for patient and persistent "explanatory" work "adapted to the practical needs of the masses".

Ignorant persons or renegades from Marxism, like Mr. Plekhanov, may shout about anarchism, Blanquism, and so forth. But those who want to think and learn cannot fail to understand that Blanquism means the seizure of power by a minority, whereas the Soviets are admittedly the direct and immediate organisation of the majority of the people. Work confined to a struggle for influence within these Soviets cannot, simply cannot, stray into the swamp of Blanquism. Nor can it blunder into the swamp of anarchism, for anarchism denies the need for a state and for state power in the period of transition from the rule of the bourgeoisie to the rule of the proletariat, whereas I, with a precision that precludes any possibility of misinterpretation, advocate the need for a state in this period, although, in accordance with Marx and the lessons of the Paris Commune, I advocate not the usual parliamentary bourgeois state, but a state without a standing army, without a police opposed to the people, without an officialdom placed above the people.

Again explaining wherein "Marxism [differs] from Blanquism"—he obviously considered it absolutely necessary for the advanced workers to understand this so as to be sure of their ground at every step—he wrote in a letter to the Central Committee of the party on September 26-27, 1917:

To be successful, insurrection must rely not upon conspiracy and not upon a party, but upon the advanced class. That is the first point. Insurrection must rely upon a revolutionary upsurge of the people. That is the second point. Insurrection must rely upon that turning-point in the history of the growing revolution when the activity of the advanced ranks of the people is at its height, and when the vacillations in the ranks of the enemy, and in the ranks of the weak, half-hearted and irresolute friends of the revolution are strongest. That is the third point. And these three conditions for raising the question of insurrection distinguish Marxism from Blanquism.

Naturally, when Lenin, or any other Marxist, spoke of the necessity of the revolutionary party having the support of the majority he meant the real majority whose sentiments are ascertainable in various ways besides the ballot box of the bourgeois state. On the eve of the insurrection he wrote his devastating attack on Zinoviev and Kamenev, who opposed the insurrection on the ground, among other things, that "we do not enjoy a majority among the people, and in the absence of that condition insurrection is hopeless".

Lenin, in A Letter to the Comrades, written on October 29-30, scornfully dismissed the authors of this statement as "either distorters of the truth or pedants who want an advance guarantee that throughout the whole country the Bolshevik Party has received exactly one-half of the votes plus one, this they want at all events, without taking the least account of the real circumstances of the revolution". Nevertheless, he took pains to prove the Bolsheviks had the majority by "facts": "the August 20 elections in Petrograd" ... "the district council elections in Moscow in September" ... "the new elections to the Soviets" ... "a majority of the peasant Soviets" who had "expressed itself against the coalition" ... "the soldiers are passing en masse over to the side of the Soviets" ... "Last, but not least ... the revolt of the peasantry". He concluded his argument on this point by saying: "To doubt now that the majority of the people are following and will follow the Bolsheviks is shameful vacillation."

Once again disavowing Blanquism, he wrote in his polemic against Zinoviev and Kamenev:

Military conspiracy is Blanquism, if it is organised not by a party of a definite class, if its organisers have not analysed the political moment in general and the international situation in particular, if the party has not on its side the sympathy of the majority of the people, as proved by objective facts ...

On September 25-27 Lenin called upon the Bolshevik Party to take power. In this famous letter, addressed "to the Central Committee, the Petrograd and Moscow Committees of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party", Lenin, with the logic and directness which characterised him, states his premise and his conclusion in the first sentence:

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.

He was not worried about a "formal" majority; "No revolution ever waits for that". But he was sure of the real majority. He insisted upon the revolution "at this very moment", as he expressed it, not sooner and not later, because:

The majority of the people are on our side. This was proved by the long and painful course of events from May 6 to August 31 and to September 12.: The majority gained in the Soviets of the metropolitan cities resulted from the people coming over to our side. The wavering of the Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, and the increase in the number of internationalists within their ranks prove the same thing.

The prosecution at the Minneapolis trial attempted to convict us, as charged in the indictment of an actual "conspiracy to overthrow the government by force and violence". We successfully refuted this accusation, and the indictment covering this point was rejected by the jury. The most effective element of our refutation of this absurd charge against our small party was our exposition of the democratic basis of the proletarian program, of the party's reliance on the majority to realise its program, and its corresponding obligation, while it remains in the minority, to "submit to the

majority". In making this exposition we had a legal purpose, but not only a legal purpose, in mind. As with all the testimony, it was designed primarily to explain and simplify our views and aims to the workers who would be future readers of the published court record.

We also thought a restatement of the Marxist position in this respect would not be wasted on the members of our own movement and might even be needed. The discussion which has arisen on this question only proves that we were more correct in this latter assumption than we realised at the time. Socialism is a democratic movement and its program, the program of the vanguard party, can be realised only with the support of the majority. The party's basic task, while it remains in the minority, is "propaganda to win over the majority". To state this was not capitulation to the prejudices of the jury; it is the teaching of Marx and Lenin, as has been shown in the foregoing references.

[1] Grandizo Munis was a Spanish Trotskyist who later become a spokesperson for the ultra-left group that calls itself the International Communist Current. They consider the existing labour movement as bourgeois, rejecting trade unionism, etc. They publish World Revolution in English.

[2] The "Oehlerites" were an ex-Trotskyist faction in the US led by Hugo Oehler. They made a principle of proclaiming "the revolutionary party" no matter how small its numbers or support, and of counterposing it as a supposedly finished institution to everything else. Essentially they were "Trotskyists" who were extremely formalistic and rigid in their thinking on general political questions as well as on the party, and thus parted company with Trotsky. They are the unacknowledged political ancestors of organisations like the WRP and SWP.

[3] Blanquism was an early form of revolutionary communism in France. The term used here means the politics of armed insurrection by a conspiratorial minority who would seize power for the workers.

THE MOVEMENT OF THE MAJORITY

By James P Cannon, from Socialism on Trial, 1941. This is an extract from Cannon's evidence in the court where, during World War 2, he and other American Trotskyists and trade unionists were put on trial and jailed for hindering the US war effort.

Q: And how will the dictatorship of the proletariat operate insofar as democratic rights are concerned?

A: We think it will be the most democratic government from the point of view of the great masses of the people that has ever existed, far more democratic, in the real essence of the matter, than the present bourgeois democracy in the United States.

Q: What about freedom of speech and all the freedoms that we generally associate with democratic government?

A: I think in the United States you can say with absolute certainty that the freedoms of speech, press, assemblage,

religion, will be written in the program of the victorious revolution.

Capitalists responsible for violence

Q: Now, what is the opinion of Marxists with reference to the change in the social order, as far as its being accompanied or not accompanied by violence?

A: It is the opinion of all Marxists that it will be accompanied by violence.

Q: Why?

A: That is based, like all Marxist doctrine, on a study of history, the historical experiences of mankind in the numerous changes of society from one form to another, the revolutions which accompanied it, and the resistance which the outlived classes invariably put up against the new order. Their attempt to defend themselves against the new order, or to suppress by violence the movement for the new order, has resulted in every important social transformation up to now being accompanied by violence.

Q: Who, in the opinion of Marxists, initiated that violence?

A: Always the ruling class; always the outlived class that doesn't want to leave the stage when the time has come. They want to hang on to their privileges, to reinforce them by violent measures, against the rising majority and they run up against the mass violence of the new class, which history has ordained shall come to power.

Q: What is the opinion of Marxists, as far as winning a majority of the people to socialist ideas?

A: Yes, that certainly is the aim of the party. That is the aim of the Marxist movement, has been from its inception.

Marx said the social revolution of the proletariat—I think I can quote his exact words from memory—"is a movement of the immense majority in the interests of the immense majority"[2] He said this in distinguishing it from previous revolutions which had been made in the interest of minorities, as was the case in France in 1789.

Q: What would you say is the opinion of Marxists as far as the desirability of a peaceful transition is concerned?

A: The position of the Marxists is that the most economical and preferable, the most desirable method of social transformation, by all means, is to have it done peacefully.

Q: And in the opinion of the Marxists, is that absolutely excluded?

A: Well, I wouldn't say absolutely excluded. We say that the lessons of history don't show any important examples in favor of the idea so that you can count upon it.

Q: Can you give us examples in American history of a minority refusing to submit to a majority?

A: I can give you a very important one. The conception of the Marxists is that even if the transfer of political power

from the capitalists to the proletariat is accomplished peacefully—then the minority, the exploiting capitalist class, will revolt against the new regime, no matter how legally it is established.

I can give you an example in American history. The American Civil War resulted from the fact that the Southern slaveholders couldn't reconcile themselves to the legal parliamentary victory of Northern capitalism, the election of President Lincoln.

Q: Can you give us an example outside of America where a reactionary minority revolted against a majority in office?

A: Yes, in Spain—the coalition of workers' and liberal parties in Spain got an absolute majority in the elections and established the People's Front government. This government was no sooner installed than it was confronted with an armed rebellion, led by the reactionary capitalists of Spain.

Q: Do you believe you can accomplish the control or acquisition, shall we say, of governmental power by being elected to it?

A: We can accomplish it if we are not interfered with by violence on the part of the capitalists.

Q: You mean, the capitalists are not going to let you be elected?

A: When we say that it is an illusion to expect that we can effect the social transformation by parliamentary action, that doesn't mean that we don't want to do it, or that we wouldn't gladly accept such a method. We don't believe, on the basis of our knowledge of history, and on the basis of our knowledge of the greed and rapacity of the American ruling class, that they will permit that kind of solution.

1917 WAS A DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION!

By Max Shachtman

The 1917 revolution was one of the greatest democratic moments in history.

The Bolshevik Party, which is now lyingly identified in both outright bourgeois and hypocritical Labour Party-style anti-socialist propaganda, as an enemy of democracy, was, above all else, the great force for democracy in the Russia of 1917. It was a force, moreover, without which the workers and peasants of the former Tsarist empire would have been crushed and their drive for democratic self-rule drowned in blood. These are the truths propounded and convincingly argued for by Max Shachtman.

Shachtman was a founder of the Trotskyist movement in the USA, who, in 1940 broke with Trotsky on the question of Russia. After Trotsky's death at the hands of a Stalinist assassin a few months later, Shachtman and his co-thinkers developed one of the two main currents of post-Trotsky Trotskyism. For them Stalinism was a new and unforeseen form of class society. Towards the end of his life (he died in 1972)) Max Shachtman lost his belief in the possibility of working-class revolution and he died a reformist.

This piece, part of a speech Shachtman made in New York on November 7 1948 on the anniversary of the Russian revolution, answers Shachtman in old age as when delivered it answered those who traduced and misrepresented Leon Trotsky and the revolutionary Russia of 1917.

When Shachtman refers to a "Third World War", which he considers inevitable, he merely repeats what all commentators in 1948 — the year when war nearly came over the Russian blockade of Berlin — took for granted.

LESS THAN THREE MONTHS after the victory of the Bolshevik revolution, Lenin remarked at a meeting that the Soviet power of the Russian workers had already lasted longer than the Paris Commune of 1871 which lived for only 10 weeks

The statement was made with pride, but no doubt with some wonderment. It reflected the conditions, incredibly complicated and difficult, under which the Russian proletariat took power into its own hands so that, for the first time in history, it could proceed to translate into reality the oldest dream of man: a society of free and equal brothers

Thirty-one years have passed since the attempt was begun. It is not a very long time as history is measured. But we live in an age when change is rapid, frequent and profound. The thirty-one years since the Russian Revolution have seen epochal changes. None is so deepgoing, so unexpected and so confounding as the change in the direction of that Revolution. The attempt made in 1917 failed. The hideous reality of Stalinism is nothing like the noble purpose of socialism which the Bolsheviks set out to achieve. In almost every respect, the former is the gruesome caricature of the latter; in many respects it is diametrically opposite. In the great initiative of the Bolsheviks, millions throughout the world saw the beginnings of the new freedom. In the present-day outcome in Russia, millions see the new slavery and millions more suffer in silenced anguish under it.

No great enterprise in history ever started under brighter auspices or ended under gloomier ones. When it began, there began also a stormy and confident offensive of revolutionary socialism, of Marxism, whose principles and programmes were embodied in the Bolshevik movement. With the triumph of the Stalinist counterrevolution, Marxism is today everywhere on the defensive.

The offensive against Marxism

THE IDEAS OF BOLSHEVISM were summed up in this: the road to freedom lies through the establishment of socialism; the road to socialism lies through the overturn of capitalism by the revolutionary power of the working class.

The offensive against Marxism is directed against these ideas, as tested in the Russian Revolution. It is an offensive on an unparalleled scale. It is sponsored by the highest government authorities. Dutifully and enthusiastically, it is carried out in virtually every number of every daily, weekly and monthly periodical...

The theme of this offensive is quite familiar: "Bolshevism leads to Stalinism. The Stalinist totalitarianism was inherent

in Bolshevism itself. The Russian Revolution could have produced nothing else than what we have in Russia today". At the right wing of the stage, you hear: "Stalinist despotism is socialism, it is the only thing you can get if you fight for socialism". At the left wing of the stage, you hear a variation on the same theme: "Stalinist despotism is not socialism, to be sure, but it is the only thing you can get if you fight for socialism which is now proved to be unattainable. In any case, it is true that Stalinism is the inevitable product of Bolshevism".

The aim of this offensive is a political one; its effects certainly are. And its political aim is a reactionary one.

The whole capitalist world, including that part of the working class world whose ideas and activities are decisively influenced by it, is now mobilised for preparations for the third world war, the war between the US and Russia. War preparations are inconceivable nowadays without ideological preparation of the people to accept the war or at least without a campaign to prevent the people from fighting during and after the war to put an end to the social system and the regime which breed war.

Because they are worried about the popular opposition to the war and the war preparations, the warmongers try to present their course to the people as a crusade for democracy against totalitarianism.

Because they are worried about the people bringing an end to the war the way the Russians did in 1917, they cry out in every imaginable key: "Don't even think of it! Whatever else you do, don't even dream of such a thing! Look what happened in Russia when the people took power into their own hands! All they got and all they could get and all you would be able to get is the monstrosity of Stalinist despotism! And if you don't believe us, who have such a miserable reputation, why, here are some experts whom you can believe—people right out of the socialist and even the Bolshevik movement itself. . . "

That is the political meaning of the contemporary offensive against the Russian Revolution. The abysmal degeneration of Stalinist Russia and of the Stalinist movement everywhere has provided the enemies of socialism with all the basic materials for the weapons in their offensive, with materials of such a kind and in such quantity as they never dreamed of having in their century long struggle against socialism.

School of falsification

WITH THE WEAPONS THEY HAVE THUS FORGED, they have slashed and mutilated the true portrait of the Bolshevik revolution so that it can no longer be recognised. We know a good deal already, thanks above all to Leon T1917rotsky, of the Stalinist school of falsification. We do not realise, however, that there is another school of falsification about the Russian Revolution that is actively at work. It is the school run by the social-democrats, zealously assisted by turncoats from the revolutionary movement. It is at once the complement of the Stalin school and of the reactionary imperialist campaign against socialism. Like all falsifiers of history, it operates with outright lies, with snapshots of events ripped away from the attending circumstances, and in the best of cases with an utter failure

Socialism and Democracy page 6

to understand what a revolution is or with criteria applied to a revolution which belong at best in a drawing room discussion or a game of cricket...

The fact which enemies of socialism are most anxious to keep in the dark is that the Bolsheviks represented not only the most revolutionary socialist movement of their time but also the most consistently vigorous democratic movement.

There is no other intelligent or intelligible explanation for the big fact that the Bolsheviks, starting as a tiny party even after the overturn of the rule of the Czar, took power and were able to maintain it for years with the support of the decisive sections of the people of Russia.

Bolsheviks supported people's demands

WHATEVER THE FORMS IT MAY TAKE, democracy must express the will of the people. In 1917, the people of Russia were completely exhausted by the war, tired of the horrible bloodletting, tired of fighting for the imperialist aims not only of Russian Czarism but of British and French bankers and monopolists. They wanted peace above all other things. They wanted it so passionately that they overthrew the regime of the Czars which they and their ancestors had endured for centuries.

What they got in place of Czarism, was a government of the Russian capitalists which wanted to continue the war, which wanted to maintain the reactionary landlordism of Russia, which feared and hated the aroused masses and sought to circumvent the will of the people and to thwart their aspirations by all the vicious devices of modern governments. This government, the provisional government of Kerensky, was supported by the two non-Bolshevik parties which enjoyed popular support, the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries, or S.R.s...

The Bolsheviks gathered millions and ever more millions of workers, soldiers and peasants around them by militantly supporting the demands of the people. They did not talk about them but fought for them. They were for immediate peace, for land to the peasants, for workers' control of the factories, for immediate convocation of a Constituent Assembly, for a truly democratic republic. And that is the fundamental reason why the Soviets rallied, in one locality after another, to the support of the Bolsheviks—in the cities, in the trenches and in the villages...

The taking over of power by the Soviets was the greatest victory in history for democracy, and this victory was made possible by the Bolshevik leadership and no other. The Bolsheviks had not invented the Soviets in some cellar or house of dogma. The Soviets were first brought into existence in 1905 by the Mensheviks. In the 1917 revolution, they were constituted and for a long time led by the Mensheviks and S.R.s not by the Bolsheviks. But it was only the Bolsheviks who said that these most democratic organs and representatives of the people shall rule in the name of the people and in their interests.

Once in power, the Bolsheviks did everything in their power to bring peace to war-exhausted Russia. If Russia was to know very little peace within its own frontiers for the next few years, the responsibility was in no sense that of the

Bolsheviks and the Soviet power. The Bolsheviks took Russia out of the imperialist war, even if it meant great sacrifices in the form of tribute to the armies of the German Kaiser. The Bolsheviks actually gave the land to the peasants, which no other political group in Russia was prepared to do except the allies of the Bolsheviks, the Left-wing S.R.s...

The Bolsheviks actually proceeded to suppress the counterrevolutionary forces and movements of the Czarists, the bankers, the clergy, the reactionary generals and the landlords. And as is befitting in a revolutionary upheaval, they proceeded by revolutionary means. When rifles were raised against the Soviet power, the Soviets replied with rifles. No revolutionary government in history worthy of the name has ever acted differently. The criticisms of the Bolsheviks in this case are made by people who never seem to have heard of the Great French Revolution or even the American Revolution and the Civil War. Every revolution has its traducers and its detractors — the dilettante detractor and the malicious detractor — who complain because it acted like a revolution and did not deal with its opponents the way you deal with them at a game of bridge. The Bolshevik revolution is no exception.

ONE OF THE GREATEST DIFFICULTIES about a revolution is that those who oppose its victory seldom understand its purpose and its determination, seldom reconcile themselves to its working existence. Here too the Bolshevik revolution was no exception.

The Bolsheviks, for example, did not even start with the idea of suppressing the capitalist parties or of disenfranchising the capitalist class. Lenin repeatedly insisted that depriving the capitalists of the right to vote was a specifically Russian phenomenon, that it might not be necessary in the revolution of other countries, and that in any case it was not a principle of Bolshevism.

Neither did the Bolsheviks start with the idea of confiscating all capitalist property and nationalising all industry. On the contrary, they opposed it. They knew the backwardness of Russia. They knew the lack of experience and culture, not only of the workers in general but of themselves as well. They not only wanted the capitalists to remain in the factories but even guaranteed a reasonable profit.

But the logic of the class struggle is inexorable. The Russian capitalist class could not reconcile itself with the idea of a Soviet state ruled by the workers and peasants. They sabotaged their own plants; they refused to co-operate in any way; they fled from the revolutionary centres and immediately launched a counterrevolutionary civil war to overturn the Soviet power. They outlawed themselves; they placed themselves, voluntarily and even eagerly, outside of Soviet legality, and nobody, least of all the Bolsheviks did that for them. Confronted with this situation, with the fact that complete economic chaos threatened the already chaotic country, the Bolsheviks proceeded to take over industry, to nationalise it, or more accurately, to legalise the seizures of the industries which the workers themselves were spontaneously carrying out, on their own initiative.

What held for the Russian capitalist class, held in substantially the same way for the two big popular parties, Socialism and Democracy page 7

the Mensheviks and the S.R.s. They could not reconcile themselves to the decisive fact that a great revolution had taken place which brought the Bolsheviks to power. They could not understand the decisive fact that the Soviets of workers, soldiers and peasants were the most democratic and the most widely supported organisations in existence, the ones through which the Russian people could rule the country in the most democratic way, the ones through which the economic reconstruction of the country could be undertaken, directed and controlled.

Instead, these two parties championed the Constituent Assembly which finally convened two months after the Bolshevik revolution but which no longer represented the people of Russia. Not only the Bolsheviks withdrew from this Assembly but also the Left-wing S.R.s, who had split with the Right-wing but which represented the big majority of the peasants.

The Soviet government was not weakened, but strengthened thereby. The Constituent Assembly could only become a rallying centre, a war-cry, for the counterrevolution in Russia, and that is why it was dispersed by the revolutionary regime. That is what the Mensheviks and Right-wing S.R.s did not understand. But its truth was soon demonstrated.

The Assembly became the programme of every counterrevolutionary inside and outside of Russia - from the Cossack generals to Winston Churchill who was soon to spend millions of pounds sterling in the attempt to overturn the workers' and peasants' power in Russia. Nowhere did the cry for the Constituent Assembly appeal successfully to the workers and peasants. They understood who championed it and why. The result was inevitable: the people rallied more firmly around the Soviets and the Soviet regime. All the efforts of the counterrevolution, organised with world-wide imperialist support, failed to overturn the new regime. Its contribution was solid, and even now it remains our permanent acquisition: for the first time in history a government of, for and by the toiling masses.

LENIN ON DEMOCRACY AND DICTATORSHIP

Lenin called for the "dictatorship of the proletariat" as a great expansion of democracy.

By "dictatorship" he meant the rule of a class, not of a Hitler or a Stalin. This is an abridged version of Lenin's "Theses on Bourgeois Democracy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat", adopted by the founding congress of the Communist International in March 1919. Long-forgotten contemporary references and examples have been cut.

FACED WITH THE GROWTH of the revolutionary workers' movement in every country, the bourgeoisie and their agents in the workers' organisations are making desperate political arguments in defence of the rule of the exploiters. Condemnation of dictatorship and defence of democracy are particularly prominent among these arguments. The falsity and hypocrisy of this argument are obvious to all who refuse to betray the fundamental principles of socialism.

First, this argument employs the concepts of "democracy in general" and "dictatorship in general", without posing the question of the class concerned. This non-class or above class presentation, which supposedly is popular, is an outright travesty of the basic tenet of socialism, namely, its theory of class struggle. For in no civilised capitalist country does "democracy in general" exist. All that exists is bourgeois democracy, and it is not a question of "dictatorship in general", but of the dictatorship of the oppressed class, i.e. the proletariat, over its oppressors and exploiters, Inc. The bourgeoisie, in order to overcome the resistance offered by the exploiters in their fight to maintain their domination.

History teaches us that no oppressed class ever did, or could, achieve power without going through a period of dictatorship, i.e. the conquest of political power and forcible suppression of the resistance always offered by the exploiters a resistance that is most desperate, most furious, and that stops at nothing.

The bourgeoisie, whose domination is now defended by the Socialists who denounce "dictatorship in general" and extol "democracy in general", won power in the advanced countries through a series of insurrections, civil wars, and the forcible suppression of kings, feudal lords, slave owners, and their attempts at restoration.

In books, pamphlets, congress resolutions, and propaganda speeches socialists everywhere have thousands and millions of times explained to the people the class nature of the bourgeois revolution and this bourgeois dictatorship.

The most democratic bourgeois republic is no more than a machine for the suppression of the working class by the bourgeoisie, for the suppression of the working people by a handful of capitalists.

It was Marx who best appraised the historical significance of the [Paris] Commune [of 1871]. In his analysis, he revealed the exploiting nature of bourgeois democracy and the bourgeois parliamentary system under which the oppressed classes enjoy the right to decide once in several years which representative of the propertied classes shall "represent and suppress" the people in parliament.

The significance of the Commune, furthermore, lies in the fact that it endeavoured to crush, to smash to its very foundations, the bourgeois state apparatus, the bureaucratic, judicial, military, and police machine, and to replace it with a self-governing, mass workers' organisation in which there was no division between legislative and executive power. All contemporary bourgeois-democracy republics, including the German republic, which the traitors to socialism, in mockery of the truth, describe as a proletarian republic, retain this state apparatus. We therefore again get quite clear confirmation of the point that shouting in defence of "democracy in general" is actually defence of the bourgeoisie and their privileges as exploiters.

"Freedom of the press" is another of the principal slogans of "pure democracy". And here, too, the workers know - and socialists everywhere have admitted it millions of times that this freedom is a deception while the best printing presses and the biggest stocks of paper are appropriated by the capitalists and while capitalist rule over the press remains, a Socialism and Democracy page 8

rule that is manifested throughout the world all the more strikingly, sharply, and cynically, the more democracy and the republican system are developed, as in America for example. The first thing to do to win real equality and genuine democracy for the working people, for the workers and peasants, is to deprive capital of the possibility of hiring writers, buying up publishing houses, and hiring newspapers. And to do that the capitalists and exploiters have to be overthrown and their resistance suppressed.

The capitalists have always used the term "freedom" to mean freedom for the rich to get richer and for the workers to starve to death.

In capitalist usage, freedom of the press means freedom of the rich to bribe the press, freedom to use their wealth to shape and fabricate so-called public opinion.

In this respect, too, the defenders of "pure democracy" prove to be defenders of an utterly foul and venal system that gives the rich control over the mass media. They prove to be deceivers of the people who, with the aid of plausible, fine-sounding, but thoroughly false phrases, divert them from the concrete historical task of liberating the press from capitalist enslavement.

Genuine freedom and equality will be embodied in the system which the communists are building and in which there will be no opportunity for amassing wealth at the expense of others, no objective opportunities for putting the press under the direct or indirect power of money, and no impediments in the way of any workingman (or groups of workingmen, in any numbers) for enjoying and practising equal rights in the use of public printing presses and public stocks of paper.

The imperialist war of 1914-18 conclusively revealed even to backward workers the true nature of bourgeois democracy, even in the freest republics, as being a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. Tens of millions were killed for the sake of enriching the German or the British group of millionaires and multimillionaires

The main thing that [Reformist] Socialists fail to understand and that constitutes their short-sightedness in matters of theory, their subservience to bourgeois prejudices, and their political betrayal of the proletariat is that in capitalist society, whenever there is any serious aggravation of the class struggle intrinsic to that society, there can be no alternative but the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie or the dictatorship of the proletariat. Dreams of some third way are reactionary, petty-bourgeois lamentations. That is borne out by more than a century of development of bourgeois democracy and the working class movement in all the advanced countries and notably by the experience of the past five years.

This is also borne out by the whole science of political economy, by the entire content of Marxism, which reveals the economic inevitability, wherever commodity economy prevails, of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie that can be replaced only by the class which the very growth of capitalism develops, multiplies, welds together, and strengthens, that is, the proletarian class.

Proletarian dictatorship is similar to the dictatorship of other classes in that it arises out of the need, as every other dictatorship does. To suppress forcibly the resistance of the class that is losing its political sway. The fundamental distinction between the dictatorship of the proletariat and the dictatorship of other classes landlord dictatorship in the Middle Ages and bourgeois dictatorship in all the civilised capitalist countries consists in the fact that the dictatorship of the landowners and bourgeoisie was the forcible suppression of the resistance offered by the vast majority of the population, namely, the working people. In contrast, proletarian dictatorship is the forcible suppression of the resistance of the exploiters, i.e. an insignificant minority of the population, the landowners and capitalists.

It follows that proletarian dictatorship must inevitably entail not only a change in democratic forms and institutions, generally speaking, but precisely such a change as provides an unparalleled extension of the actual enjoyment of democracy by those oppressed by capitalism the toiling classes.

The substance of Soviet government is that the permanent and only foundations of state power, the entire machinery of state. is the mass-scale organisation of the classes oppressed by capitalism, i.e. the workers and semi-proletarians (peasants who do not exploit the labour of others and regularly resort to the sale of at least part of their own labour power). It is the people, who even in the most democratic bourgeois republics, while possessing equal rights by law, have in fact been debarred by thousands of devices and subterfuges from participation in political life and enjoyment of democratic rights and liberties, that are now drawn into constant and unflinching, moreover, decisive participation in the democratic administration of the state.

The old, i.e. bourgeois democracy and the parliamentary system were so organised that it was the mass of working people who were kept furthest away from the machinery of government. Soviet power, i.e. the dictatorship of the proletariat' on the other hand, is so organised as to bring the working people close to the machinery of government. That, too, is the purpose of combining the Legislative and executive authority under the soviet organisation of the state and to replacing territorial constituencies by production Units the factory.

The army was a machine of oppression under not only the monarchy. It remains as such in all bourgeois republics, even the most democratic ones. Only the soviets, the permanent organisations of government authority of the classes that were oppressed by capitalism, are in a position to destroy the army's subordination to bourgeois commanders and really merge the proletariat with the army; only the soviets can effectively arm the proletariat and disarm the bourgeoisie. Unless this is done, the victory of socialism is impossible.

Only the soviet organisation of the state can really effect the immediate break-up and total destruction of the old, i.e. bourgeois, bureaucratic and Judicial machinery. which has been, and has inevitably had to be, retained under capitalism even in the most democratic republics, and which is, in actual fact, the greatest obstacle to the practical implementation of democracy for the workers and the working people generally. The Paris Commune took the first

epoch-making step along this path. The soviet system has taken the second.

Destruction of stale power is the aim set by all socialists, including Marx above all. Genuine democracy, i.e. liberty and equality, is unrealisable unless this aim is achieved. But its practical achievement is possible only through soviet, or proletarian democracy, for by enlisting the mass organisations of the working people in constant and unflinching participation in the administration of the state, it immediately begins to prepare the complete withering away of any state.

The ludicrous attempt to combine the soviet system, i.e. proletarian dictatorship, with the National Assembly, i.e. bourgeois dictatorship, utterly exposes the paucity of thought of the Yellow Socialists and Social Democrats, their reactionary petty-bourgeois political outlook, and their cowardly concessions to the irresistibly growing strength of the new, proletarian democracy.

TROTSKY ON DEMOCRACY IN THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION (1918)

The fate of the Constituent Assembly

When, after Korniloff's adventure, the paramount parties on the Soviets made an attempt to make amends for their previous attitude of indulgence towards the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie, they demanded the speedy convocation of the Constituent Assembly.

Kerensky, who had just been saved by the Soviets from the too close embrace of his ally Korniloff, was obliged to give in. The Constituent Assembly was fixed for the end of November. But the circumstances had by that time become such that no guarantee whatsoever was available that the Constituent Assembly would, indeed, be called together.

Complete disorganization reigned at the front, the number of deserters was growing every day, and the soldiers threatened to leave the trenches in regiments and corps and to withdraw to the rear, devastating everything on their way. In the country districts seizures of private lands and livestock were going on in a most haphazard fashion. Martial law was in consequence proclaimed in many places.

Meanwhile the German troops continued to advance, took Riga and threatened Petrograd. The Right wing of the bourgeoisie was openly rejoicing over the danger threatening the revolutionary capital. The Government offices had been evacuated from Petrograd. and Kerensky intended to transfer the seat of his Government to Moscow.

All that made the possibility of the Constituent Assembly being called together not only remote, but well-nigh unlikely.

From this point of view the November overturn may have been regarded as the salvation of the Constituent Assembly as well as of the Revolution as a whole. And when we argued that the road to the Constituent Assembly lay not through Tsereteli's Provisional Parliament, but through the seizure of power by the Soviets, we were absolutely sincere.

But the endless postponements of the summoning of the Constituent Assembly had not been without effect on it. Announced in the first days of the Revolution, it made its appearance after eight or nine months of a severe struggle between classes and parties. It came too late to have still a chance of playing a constructive role.

Its intrinsic futility had been predetermined by one single fact which at first might have appeared as of small importance, but which later on affected the fate of the Constituent Assembly tremendously.

During the first phases of the Revolution the party of the Socialist Revolutionaries had been numerically the strongest. I have already mentioned its amorphous condition and its mixed social composition.

The Revolution had been irresistibly leading to the internal differentiation among those who were marching under the Populist banner. The left wing of this party, representing a portion of the industrial workers and the great masses of the poorer peasantry, was separating more and more from the rest, and ultimately found itself in an irreconcilable opposition to the leaders of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, who represented the lower and middle bourgeoisie. But the inertia of the party frame and traditions delayed the inevitable split.

The proportional system of elections rests, as is well known, entirely on party lists. As these lists had been drawn up two or three months before the November Revolution, the names of the Left and the Right Socialist Revolutionaries figured pell-mell in the same list, under the banner of the same party.

In this way, by the time of the November Revolution, when the Right Socialist Revolutionaries were already arresting members of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, and the Left were joining the Bolsheviks for the overthrow of the Government of the Socialist Revolutionary Kerensky, the old lists were still retaining their validity, and peasants at the elections for the Constituent Assembly were obliged to vote for lists headed by Kerensky's name and containing names of Left Socialist Revolutionaries who were taking part in the conspiracy against him.

The months preceding the November Revolution were marked by an incessant orientation of the masses towards the Left and a wholesale flow of the workers, soldiers, and peasants into the ranks of the Bolsheviks. During the same period the same process was manifesting itself in the ranks of the Socialist Revolutionary Party in the shape of the extension of the Left wing at the expense of the Right.

Yet three-fourths of the names figuring on the party lists of the Socialist Revolutionaries were those of the old leaders of the Right wing, whose revolutionary reputation had been forfeited completely during their coalition with the Liberal bourgeoisie.

To this must be added the fact that the elections took place during the first weeks following the November Revolution. The news of the change was spreading in slowly widening circles from the capital to the provinces, from the towns to the villages. In many places the masses of peasantry had a

very vague idea of what had taken place in Petrograd and Moscow.

They nominally voted for "Land and Liberty," for their representatives on the land committees, who, for the most part, were following the Populist banner. In effect, they were voting for Kerensky and Avksentieff, who were dissolving those very land committees and arresting their members.

The result of it all was a most incredible political paradox: one of the two parties which were to dissolve the Constituent Assembly, viz. the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, was actually elected on the same lists as the party which had obtained the majority in the Constituent Assembly.

These facts show clearly what a belated product the Constituent Assembly was in comparison with the actual progress of party warfare and party differentiations. We must now examine the question also from the point of view of principle.

The principles of democracy and the dictatorship of the proletariat

As Marxists, we have never been worshippers of formal democracy. In a society split into classes, the democratic institutions, far from abolishing the class struggle, only lend the class interests a highly imperfect form of expression.

The possessing classes have always at their disposal thousands of means to, pervert and adulterate the will of the labouring masses.

In time of revolution democratic institutions form a still less perfect apparatus for the expression of the class struggle. Marx called Revolution "the locomotive of history." The open and direct struggle for power enables the labouring masses to acquire in a short time a wealth of political experience and thus rapidly to pass from one, stage to another in the process of their mental evolution.

The ponderous mechanism of democratic institutions cannot keep pace with this evolution – and this in proportion to the vastness of the country and the imperfection of the technical apparatus at its disposal.

The Right Socialist Revolutionaries were in a majority at the Constituent Assembly. In accordance with parliamentary usage, they should have formed the Government. But the Right Socialist Revolutionaries had had the chance of forming such a Government during the whole period of Revolution before November.

Yet they had refrained from doing so, had handed over the lion's share of power to the Liberal bourgeoisie, and exactly for that reason they had lost the last vestige of influence among the most revolutionary sections of the people by the very time when the numerical composition of the Constituent Assembly placed them under the formal obligation to assume the reins of government.

The working class, together with the Red Guard, were deeply hostile to the Right Socialist Revolutionaries. The overwhelming majority of the army supported the Bolsheviks.

The revolutionary elements in the villages divided their sympathies between the Left Socialist Revolutionaries and the Bolsheviks. The sailors, who had been so prominent in all the incidents of the Revolution, were almost to a man with our party.

The Right Socialist Revolutionaries had, in fact, been compelled to leave the Soviets, which had assumed power in November, that is, before the Constituent Assembly.

On what support could a Ministry formed by such a majority of the Constituent Assembly depend? It would have had behind it the rich of the villages, intellectuals, and the old officialdom, and perhaps would have found support, for the time being, among the middle class. But such a Government would have been completely deprived of the material apparatus of power.

In the centres of political life, like Petrograd, it would have met at once with an uncompromising resistance. If the Soviets had, in accordance with the formal logic of democratic institutions, handed over their power to the party of Kerensky and Tchernoff, the new Government, discredited and impotent, would have only succeeded in temporarily confusing the political life of the country, and would have been overthrown by a new rising within a few weeks.

The Soviets decided to reduce this belated historical experiment to a minimum, and dissolved the Constituent Assembly on the very day when it assembled.

On this account our party has been made the butt of most violent accusations. No doubt the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly made a very unfavourable impression in the leading quarters of the Socialist parties of the West, and the politically unavoidable and necessary act was denounced there as a piece of party tyranny and sectarian arbitrariness.

Kautsky, with his customary pedantry, explained in a series of articles the mutual relationship between the Socialist and Revolutionary tasks of the proletariat and the regime of political democracy. He endeavoured to prove that the observance of the principle of democracy was always, in the last resort, advantageous to the working class.

Of course, in a general way, and on the whole, that is true. But Kautsky reduced this historical truth to a piece of professorial banality. If it always, in the end, pays the proletariat to wage its class struggle and even to exercise its dictatorship within the frame of democratic institutions, it does not at all follow that history always affords the chance of such a combination.

It does not follow from the Marxian theory at all that history invariably creates conditions which are the most "advantageous" to the proletariat.

It is at present difficult to say what course the Revolution would have taken if the Constituent Assembly had been summoned in its second or third month. Very probably the parties of the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, which then predominated, would have discredited themselves, together with the Constituent Assembly, in the Socialism and Democracy page 11

eyes not only of the more active elements which were supporting the Soviets, but even in those of the backward popular masses, whose hopes would have been bound up, not with the Soviets, but with the Constituent Assembly.

In such circumstances the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly might have been followed by new elections from which the parties of the Left would have emerged in a majority. But the course of events went in a different direction. The elections to the Constituent Assembly took place in the ninth month of the Revolution, and by that time the class struggle had reached such a degree of intensity that it burst, by its internal pressure, the formal framework of democracy.

The proletariat led the army and lower masses of peasantry. These classes were in a state of direct and fierce revolt against the Right Socialist Revolutionaries. Yet, thanks to the cumbrous machinery of democratic elections, this party obtained a majority in the Constituent Assembly, representing the pre-November phase of the Revolution.

This was a contradiction which could not be solved within the framework of formal democracy, and only political pedants, who do not clearly realize the revolutionary logic of the relations of classes, can, in face of the situation resulting from the November events, preach to the proletariat banal truths concerning the advantages of democracy for waging the class war.

History chose to put the problem in a form much more concrete and acute. The Constituent Assembly, by its composition, was obliged to hand over the reins of power to the Tchernoff-Kerensky-Tsereteli group.

Was this group capable of guiding the Revolution? Could they find support in the class which formed the backbone of the Revolution? No. The material class-contents of the Revolution came into an irreconcilable conflict with its democratic forms.

Thereby the fate of the Constituent Assembly was decided in advance. Its dissolution appeared as the only conceivable surgical way out of the contradictory situation which was not of our making, but had been brought about by the preceding course of events.

From The History of the Russian Revolution to Brest-Litovsk, chapters 29 and 30.

AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

By Hal Draper

Introduction

The Russian revolution was the most important event of the 20th century. It was the most important event in the entire history of the working class. The working class took and held power in territory that covered one sixth of the globe.

That working class power was overthrown in the early-mid 1920s by the Stalinist counter-revolution, which though continuing to call itself “communist” and “working class” put in a brutal and savage state bureaucracy as a new ruling class over the working people.

That Stalinist “dictatorship of the bureaucracy” — brutal, exploiting class power pretending to be socialism — fell in 1991.

The triumphant bourgeoisie took over not only the territory of the USSR and its empire of satellite states in Eastern Europe, but also part of its spiritual and intellectual empire, the central Great Lie of the bureaucratic Stalinist ruling class — the claim that the Stalinist system was a legitimate and necessary continuation of the Russian working class revolution of 1917.

Socialism? That was Stalinism. And therefore socialism is dead and buried in the same historical boneyard as European Stalinism.

No it isn't!

Uncovering and telling the truth about the great working class revolution of 1917, is one of the irreplaceable jobs which socialists must do now. Not only to do justice to the great women and men who made that revolution and to those of its leaders, in the first place, Lenin and Trotsky, who died defending it against the Stalinist counter-revolution. But also, because it is a major part of rebuilding a viable working class socialist movement in the 21st century.

Those who forget the glories of the working class's past, or lazily let them be buried under mountains of ruling class misrepresentation, diminish both themselves and the prospects we can hold out to the working class about its future.

The following discussion by the American Marxist scholar Hal Draper is of a book written by a non-Bolshevik member of the government that took power in October 1917, I N Steinberg. Steinberg was a leader of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, of the faction known as the Left S-Rs, who were in coalition with the Bolsheviks for a few months after October 1917, from soon after the establishment of the Soviet Government.

Steinberg's book, "In the Workshop of the Revolution", was published in 1954 long after he left Russia. Despite the Left S-Rs' split from the Bolshevik-led Soviet Government, Steinberg tells the truth about the Bolshevik seizure of power and about the early months of Soviet Government.

Even when he subscribes to anti-Bolshevik propaganda about the period after the S-R-Bolshevik coalition broke up, he does it in such a way that the truth, as Hal Draper demonstrates in the following article, is still visible.

Paddy Dollard

In the "Workshop of the Revolution", Steinberg presents the 1917 upheaval not as a conspiracy but as a real people's revolution. And he is very inconsiderate of the myths about Socialism and Democracy page 12

the “democratic” Kerensky regime which the bad Bolsheviks overthrew, as well as the Menshevik and Right Socialist Revolutionary allies of Kerensky.

Actually Steinberg's language about the “moderate socialist parties” (Menshevik and Right SRs) is very mild, but the outline of the picture he paints is damning enough. That picture is of an elemental revolutionary upsurge of the masses from below, determined to throw off all oppression and equally determined to end the war, which the rights and moderates tried to oppose, and which the Bolsheviks (and left SRs) supported. This was the simple difference between the historic reality and the anti-Bolshevik myth of a “conspiracy”.

Of the right wing socialists, Steinberg writes that they believed “that the necessary conditions were not yet in evidence to realise the programme of the people. They conceived it impossible to end the war without the co-operation of the Allied powers. They thought it utopian to transfer political power to the working classes since, in their view the capitalist order in Russia was inevitable. Their interpretation of the revolution as only a democratic bourgeois succession to Tsarism, demanded, of course, a corresponding strategy — the strategy of class compromise and political compliance. This strategy put the moderate two parties (Mensheviks and Right Socialist-Revolutionaries) halfway between the bourgeois and the working-class programmes, gave their activities an air of vacillation and, in fact, fortified the position of the bourgeois camp.”

Now to be sure, the anti-Bolsheviks argue strenuously that anything beyond a bourgeois revolution was indeed impossible, but what Steinberg points up sharply is that this line meant that the right-wingers had to set themselves against and get ready to suppress the revolutionary dynamism of the people. It is because the anti-Bolsheviks have to get around this inconvenient fact that the myth of a “conspiracy” was born.

By the time of the new Kerensky government of 10 July, Steinberg relates, “Kerensky had lost hold of the ties of confidence which once had bound him to the people.” Discreditation rebounded not only against Kerensky but also against the Menshevik and Right SR ministers who joined his cabinet.

“The main speaker for an exponent of this rootless coalition”, writes Steinberg “was the Social-Democrat (Menshevik) Tseretelli. As minister of the interior, he dispatched a circular to the whole country designed to redouble the power of the government commissars against the active local soviets. He ordered these commissars to block the ‘illegal distribution of landed properties,’ the ‘appropriation, ploughing and sowing of other people's lands.’ He thus sustained the policy of his predecessor, Prince Lvov. Every circular of this kind was like a match thrown into the powder keg of the revolution.”

Being highly concerned with the democratic forms of the revolution, Steinberg especially emphasises the transformation of the Kerensky regime into a “quasi-dictatorship” — with the consent and support of the very democratic Mensheviks and S-Rs who were later to issue howling blasts of anguish at every step the Soviet

government took even to defend itself against armed insurrection.

Steinberg's general sketch of the whole development, of course, contributes nothing new to historical knowledge, its main interest lying in the character of the narrator. There are vignette touches here and there.

- In August, as the State Conference organised by Kerensky we see the scene where Bublikov, a leading industrial capitalist, steps up to shake Tseretelli's hand before the assemblage, an impressive piece of symbolism while at the same moment a general strike of workers in Moscow was going on.

- While we all know that Kerensky and a few die-hard slanderers still preserve the chestnut about the Bolsheviks being "German agents" we can read in Steinberg that the Kerensky government itself was thus accused. In the manifest of the Kornilov revolt, he reaction declared "The Provisional Government standing as it does under the pressure of the Bolsheviks in the soviets, workers in full agreement with the German General Staff..."

With regard to the seizure of power itself, Steinberg is typically ambivalent "the Left Social-Revolutionaries" he relates "did not think it advisable to precipitate such a rebellion. In tier opinion it would be sufficient for the [Soviet] Congress to maintain the positions of the people and lead the revolution to the Constituent Assembly. But they felt that, if the masses were to rebel, they would not stand against them."

No initiative toward revolution — and no opposition to it: you just go along with the surge of the people. The left S-Rs could never have been leaders of the revolution, the role that had to be played by the Bolsheviks and on the other hand they could never have been enemies of the revolution. They combined the fuzziest of ideologies with real revolutionary sentiments and combination which doomed them to be simple fellow travellers of the revolution.

They had no political compass of their own, but as sincere revolutionists they could feel which way the revolutionary aspirations of the people were blowing. When the wind stopped blowing in one clear direction, they were lost.

Steinberg does not link up his above-quoted reference to the Left S-R's coolish opinion on the seizure of power with what he describes later as the great result of the "inadvisable" rebellion. Left S-Rs like Steinberg never could orient themselves in the criss cross of events and policies but they could respond like sensitive barometers to revolutionary élan.

"The October Revolution brought tremendous expectations, there was now a profound sense of relief. It is true that there was also great bitterness about the past, great anxiety for the future; but the deepest sensation which October aroused in the people was joy. In city, village and army, people rejoiced in the fullness of their liberation, in the limitless freedom that now summoned their creative efforts. It was as if the walls of Jericho had crumbled before their eyes. A new life called to them with a thousand voices: from now on 'everything is possible to man'. Everything is possible' did

not mean license and wilful destruction, but full freedom to satisfy the constructive urges and the noblest ideals of man.

"All aspects of existence social economic, political, spiritual, moral, familial were opened to purposeful fashioning by human hands. Ideas for social betterment and progress that had been gathering for generations in Russia and elsewhere seemed to wait on the threshold of the revolution ready to put forth and permeate the life of the Russian people. The issues were not only social and economic reforms and thoroughgoing political changes; with equal zeal the awakened people turned to the fields of justice and education, to art and literature. Everywhere the driving passion was to create something new, to effect a total difference with 'the old world' and its civilisation. It was one of those uncommon moments of self perception and self assertion. The storm passed nobody by: neither those who hailed it as a blessing nor those who spurned it as a curse."

It was this climate of a world reborn which in the first place doomed the Constituent Assembly as a vestigial remnant of the "old world". When the Constituent Assembly was swept away in the tide, it scarcely created even a ripple. It had ceased to have any significance.

What played a greater role at the time was a different question: coalition cabinet or one-party cabinet. And here, in Steinberg's account, we come to another reason why determined anti-Bolsheviks will not like this book. The reason is this: even when Steinberg is doing his best to be as "anti-Bolshevik" as they come, he just can't seem to squeeze out any facts to give colour to his strictures. The trouble it would seem, is that he had old-fashioned prejudices against simply inventing suitable "facts" to fit anti-Bolshevik specifications.

Steinberg and the Left S-Rs were enthusiastically in favour of constituting the first Soviet government as a coalition of all the socialist parties, including the Mensheviks and Right S-Rs. But the latter made it impossible, for a simple and straightforward reason: they were against the revolution and would enter its government only to behead it. Steinberg uses some language blaming "extremists" on both sides (Bolsheviks as well as the rightists, presumably) but every fact in his account speaks one way only: "Protesting violently, the Mensheviks and Right Socialist-Revolutionaries quit the Second Soviet Congress when it proclaimed the Soviet Republic. Thus, the moderates caused the final split in the camp of the working classes and facilitated the establishment eventually of a purely Bolshevik government.

So the Left S-Rs set out to be the honest brokers who would bring the right-wing socialists back into the coalition. After all, these right-wing socialists had lived more or less happily in a coalition government dominated by imperialists and capitalists; why should they be so intransigent about entering a coalition with revolutionary socialists? It disconcerted the honest brokers no end.

On the day the first cabinet was established, the Bolsheviks formally invited the Left S-Rs to name three representatives. At this point the Left S-Rs refused, on the ground that they wanted an all-around coalition. So the Bolsheviks had to set up the cabinet themselves.

Negotiations for the inclusion of the rightists continued, but uselessly; for the condition which the Mensheviks and Right S-Rs set for their participation was breathtaking: nothing more than that Lenin and Trotsky (by name) should be kicked out of the government! Fantastic as it seemed, they were not even clever enough to try to undermine the revolution by stealth: they openly demanded just as if they had not been defeated and discredited, that the revolution behead itself in order to obtain, as a reward their own worth personages, now a little shopworn form being kicked around by Kerensky but still willing to “save” the revolution for capitalism and war.

“It was amazing” writes Steinberg. “During the February period, the Mensheviks and the Right Socialist-Revolutionaries had countenanced all possible coalitions with bourgeois parties, even when they were opening reactionary. But the same leaders now rejected indignantly the idea of a socialist coalition, that is, co-operation with the Bolshevik Party, which at that time was still weak and stills ought support in other related elements. Lenin’s face for them seemed to eclipse all of the revolution. And again they unwittingly helped prepare the ground for his future dictatorship.”

So Steinberg complains that “Lenin’s secret political purpose” was a “dictatorship” all the while, but whereas Steinberg was clever enough to mind-read Lenin’s secret thoughts, no one else in the country had to be half so clever in order to see that it was in fact the right wing socialists who were torpedoing any unity.

The Left S-Rs finally joined the coalition themselves, and their course afterwards is another story.

Steinberg’s account of the Constituent Assembly adds nothing new to the question. What he choose to emphasise, however, is that it was the right wing socialists (again) who excluded any possible compromise.

When the Constituent Assembly met, Chernov (Right S-R leader) was elected president and

“Of all possible attitudes toward the Soviets, Chernov (and the Right Socialist Revolutionary Party that stood behind him) chose the most dangerous, if not the most foolish tactic: he simply ignored the Soviets as if they did not exist at all. His major speech, which naturally encompassed all cardinal issues of the revolution, was delivered with the incredible pretence that the Constituent Assembly had convened in a social vacuum. He announced that negotiations for peace would be started with the Allied powers, that the socialisation of land would be carried through; that the federative rights of all nationalities would be proclaimed. Not with a single word did he mention that all these vital tasks were already being realised in the country and followed with intense interest in the whole world.

“What did all this mean? By implication it was a challenge to the Soviets and the masses that stood by them. For the Constituent Assembly, the only chance of survival lay in some compromise with the revolutionary forces that had already struck roots. It would have been easy to find some legal, constitutional and political form for such understand. Socialism and Democracy page 14

But this one way of averting civil war within the camp of the working people was ignored by the majority [of the assembly]. Did it then hope that the Soviets would simply capitulate?”

Like all the others in the mainstream of the revolution the Left SRs now looked on the Constituent Assembly as an obsolete reminder of pre-October Russia.

In chapter 13 of Steinberg’s book we find him in jail! What has happened? For a whole chapter our honest author goes through description of some local prison colour, ponderings about the French Revolution, tales about prisoners etc... and not a word about why he and a whole group of Left S-R’s have been imprisoned. He barely manages to mention casually even that the Left S-Rs had left the government: why? Not a word.

At one point, he pictures himself as wondering “What this the final break-up of the once common front?” The reader naturally must suppose that this break up has taken place because of the Bolsheviks’ action in jailing their ex-partners.

It is well-nigh incredible but Steinberg drags the reader through three more whole chapters before he even discusses his own version of what had happened to the coalition. The reason for this peculiar structure is no mystery or personal idiosyncrasy.

Steinberg is deliberately engaged in recreating the impression — without deliberately lying at all — that he and his Left S-R party broke with the Bolsheviks over questions of democracy and terrorism, that is, over questions which today are “respectable” ones for anti-Bolsheviks.

And of course, the indisputable historic fact is that his party broke with the Bolsheviks over an entirely different issue... because of their intransigent and violent opposition to the Brest-Litovsk peace with Germany and for no other reason.

The Tsarist arm had disintegrated, the whole land in revolution was in turmoil, the German army was threatening on the borders, whole regiments were deserting the lines, the front could not be held; better yield to the German’ robber demands for a peace than have the revolution crushed: a revolutionary war against the German invasion could not be sustained; there was no choice... So Lenin argued, not only against the Steinbergian phrasemongers but also against a strong minority of the Bolsheviks themselves, a minority which publicly campaigned for its position outside of the party and against its majority.

The Left S-Rs advocated war, not peace; but this position was defeated at the Congress of Soviets which met to ratify the Brest Treaty. Thereupon, right there, Steinberg announced for the left S-Rs that they were withdrawing from the government — “to the consternation of all present” he adds.

One searches the six meagre pages which he devotes to the whole issue... for Steinberg’s statement of reasons in favour of his position of continuing the war rather than accepting the forced peace. This is what one finds.

Continuing the war by partisan warfare “might encourage the German people to resistance against their own masters. But ‘peace’ would automatically strengthen the German imperialist forces both at home and abroad.”

Now, as a matter of record it was the Brest peace which did play an important part in stimulating revolutionary discontent in Germany; but the 1917 general strike wave in Germany and Austria proved that the revolution there was not yet ripe; and it was not at all necessary for the Left S-Rs to agitate Lenin about the quintessential need for the German revolution to come to the aid of the Soviets; and... But all this is really beside the point.

Steinberg and the Left S-Rs did not adopt their position out of overweening anxiety for the German revolution. It is transparent rationalisation. If not, the Left S-R position would have been merely tactical opposition to the Brest treaty, as indeed was the case with the dissident Bolsheviks. On the contrary, as Steinberg makes clear, for the Left S-Rs the surrender of Russian territory to the German robbers was a principle “capitulation” of the revolution.

Steinberg quotes himself from an 1918 article: If we sign, “no trace will remain of the meaning and content of the [Soviet] republic.” At the end of this chapter we also find that the Brest treaty “broke the moral backbone of the coalition.”

Why? Why were the Left S-Rs so frenetically and principledly outraged by this peace signed at the point of Germany’s guns? Was it perhaps, the infusion of sheer national-chauvinism in their fuzzy ideology which prevented them from accepting the loss of Russian territory, even in order to save the revolution? Yes.

Well, then... had the Bolsheviks thrown the [Steinberg] in jail just because he and his Left S-Rs had left the government? Of course, no...

The Left S-R party decided to make up for their defeat in the Soviet Changer by embroiling Russia in war with Germany by their own organised provocation.

On 6 July, two Left S-R agents assassinated the German ambassador, count von Mirbach. Steinberg does not boggle over the question of the party Central Committee’s responsibility for this move. The party’s leaders, Spiridonova, proudly claimed full responsibility for the act, in the traditions of S-R individual terrorism. The last thing the party wanted was to have the assassination treated as merely involving two individual murderers. It was the party that had ordered Mirbach’s assassination in order to provoke Germany into renewing its assault on Russia.

Steinberg writes that “In actuality the Left S-Rs *at that time* had had no intentions of staging a revolt.” [Italics added]. That is at that time they were “merely” trying to get a war started against the country so as to bring about the “revolutionary war” which the majority of the country had rejected (Democrats they are you see.)

Perhaps some readers will not believe that a man can be so naïve as to tell this story on himself and still continue to write as if his party was engaged in nothing out of the Socialism and Democracy page 15

ordinary from the point of view of its democratic rights. But the fact is that Steinberg actually writes the following fantastic and almost unbelievable words:

“but Lenin and Trotsky could not forgive another party for acting independently and thus challenging their dictatorship.”

He actually writes this after himself recounting his party’s war plot! *The Left S-Rs were just “acting independently” of the government, is that a crime? Doesn’t a party have the democratic right to assassinate an ambassador in order to get a war started against its own country! You call this a revolt? And so what if our “revolutionary war” program has been voted down by the Soviet Congress? So what if I, Steinberg, nowhere in my own book even claim that a majority of the country was really for it? Is it not another proof of Lenin’s “dictatorship” that he could not “forgive” this little innocent plan to start a war? Are we not great democrats and he a dictator?

Like a character straight out of Wonderland, Steinberg continues to write about the Left S-Rs’ “deep shock” when the Bolshevik government reacted sharply.

But this was July 1918. it was not until seven months later that Steinberg found himself wondering about things in prison. What had happened in this interval?

Specifically we have already seen that Steinberg had written that “the left S-Rs at that time [July 1918] had had no intentions of staging a revolt” How did their intentions develop?

This brings us to the question of the Left S-Rs going over to the programme of armed struggle against the Soviet government.

This party, which had broken with the Bolsheviks over the issue of war rather than peace, which proclaimed that it regarded this issue as involving the whole content of the revolution, which was so frantically anxious to blow up the Brest peace that it reverted to its terrorist-assassination methods in order to embroil the country in a war on the vote of its own narrow Central committee as against the vote of the Soviet Congress — was it true or wasn’t it true that this party then moved to a programme of armed insurrection against the government.

Steinberg not only states but documents the party position.

Steinberg first summarise the thinking of the party on attitude to the government. “Almost unwittingly, a policy of ‘war on two fronts’ evolved,” he writes — one war against the White interventionists and simultaneous war against the Soviet government. “They might have said We shall fight the bourgeois counter-revolution as if the Bolshevik state did not exist, and we shall fight bolshevism as if social reaction did not stand poised to stab us in the back.”

But — Steinberg continues in summary of his comrades’ thinking — could such a two-front war succeed? Perhaps we should table our quarrel with Bolshevik policy in order to defend the revolution’s future?

“Should the Left S-Rs then inform the regime of their decision, so that they might be released and take part in the battle? The conclusion seemed logical, but—
“it did not satisfy the moral conscience of the prisoners.”

(Note that Steinberg implicitly demonstrates that he has no doubt that the Left S-Rs would have been freed from jail if they had been willing to adopt this position, against armed insurrection.)

How did the party divide on the question? It was debated among the Left S-R prisoners and “argued in the secret correspondence with the illegal Central Committee of the Left S-Rs outside.”

One faction (the “moderates”) declared “We... reject for the time being any armed struggle against the Bolshevik government because it might play into the hands of forces hostile to the revolution.” (Italics added.) The other faction (“intransigents”) argued for the two-front war: “you cannot destroy one without the other.” They were for armed struggle now and against calling for a “fight against the Denikins under Bolshevik leadership.”

Who won? All Steinberg reports is that the “moderates” were “restrained” and their will “paralysed” by their fear that they might be regarded by the others as selling out to the Bolsheviks. Is it fair to conclude then that the “intransigents” dominated the party councils? At this point Steinberg simply ignores the obvious question. And of course it should be remembered the “moderates” were those who did not favour immediate organisation of armed struggle.

In any case, Steinberg next presents the text of a document hitherto unknown to me, which is decisive by itself.

It proves to the hilt without any possibility of doubt whatsoever that the Bolshevik government asked only, as the condition for releasing the Left S-Rs that they state publicly that they were against “armed action” to overthrow the government. This the S-Rs refused to do. Hence there is no possibility of dispute over why they were in prison. All this emerges from the text of the document itself. Steinberg does not point it up one way or the other. One can even wonder whether he realised the meaning of the document which he quotes!

In August 1919 the Left S-R Central Committee with the agreement of “all party circles” decided on negotiations with the Bolsheviks for an agreement which would legalise their party and free their prisoners. Kamenev, Beloborodoff and Stassova represented the Bolsheviks, the Left S-R delegation of three included Steinberg. There are six pages of direct quotations from the discussion as selected by Steinberg himself.

The Left S-Rs proposed to “transfer the centre of our political operations to the provinces occupied by the Whites.” In exchange for this they demanded: legality in these provinces after liberation and immediate release of all jailed party members.

Immediately what Kamenev wanted to know was: “Will you give up your tactics of armed struggle against us!”
Socialism and Democracy page 16

Of course, the Bolsheviks also kept pointing out that it was impossible and absurd to have a situation where a party was illegal in (say) Moscow because of its programme of armed insurrection while it was legal in a recently liberated province, insecurely held, with the same programme.

The Bolsheviks kept hammering away at the main point.

In his very first speech Kamenev said “Can we ever come to an agreement with you, as clear and decisive as our split has been? Back in October (1917) we had differences of opinion too, yet we were able to work together.” And in this framework he posed the decisive question of “armed action”.

Turning and twisting the Left S-Rs refused to say yes or no. One of them evaded by merely saying that “You have no proofs whatsoever of our participation in any plots.” But the Bolsheviks were not asking for proof one way or the other. They were merely asking for a public statement of party policy against armed action.

The second S-R evaded with the following phrase: “And anyway we have been refraining from armed action against you for some time” — apparently not even realising what he was admitting with this formulation.

Steinberg didn't even refer to Kamenev's insistent question (according to the text of the first conference as given in his book).

The send and last negotiation conference took place in September. Here the Bolsheviks were even more insistent in narrowing the issue down to insurrection.

It is not enough for you S-Rs the Bolsheviks explained quite patiently to say that you reject armed insurrection because at the present time you don't actually have the means for it. That only convinces us that as soon as you can gather your forces, locally or nationally, you will act as before. What we are asking for is a statement of party policy against it...

Steinberg replied: “Our party has not, so far, officially proclaimed any armed struggle against the Bolsheviks. You will not be able to find a single such decision in our party conferences. That is why we do not need a paragraph about it.”

Of course the party had not yet proclaimed any armed struggle. That was in question at no point. As to a statement of party policy not a word could be elicited from the Left S-R delegation other than what we have quoted above.

And that settles that.

LABOUR PARTY: THE SHAM OF 'ONE MEMBER, ONE VOTE'

By John Bloxam and John O'Mahony

"After the rising of the 17th of June [the East Berlin workers uprising of 1953] the Secretary of the Writers Union had leaflets handed out in the Stalinalee in which it can be read that the people had forfeited the confidence of the

government, and could only win it back by redoubled efforts. Would it not be simpler if the government dissolved the people and elected another?"

Bertold Brecht, *The Solution*

"One member one vote" has now become the main political rallying cry of the right, and their voice and base in Fleet Street (narrow base, loud voice!). The slogan is a misrepresentation of what they are actually proposing and of the issues involved—on a Saatchi and Saatchi scale.

The right have taken up this cry because their real principle—no vote for anyone but the MPs—has now been decisively rejected. They are trying to present themselves as more democratic than the democrats who defeated them. But their goal is to restore, on a new basis, the situation where the MPs are beyond the effective control of the labour movement. The essential point in their proposals would involve a move—or a first move—to institute something resembling the US primaries.

They are not concerned with ensuring that every party member has a vote' for of course all individual members and representatives of affiliated members have it now. What they are concerned about is that decisions should be made in a new and radically different way: postal ballots, perhaps extended to "mini-elections" of "registered" party supporters. Right now this is presented as a way to elect the Leader. The next step would be a drive to do parliamentary selections this way, too.

They calculate that with the help of the media they could then base themselves directly on members who do not now vote in party matters because they are not actively involved in the party, and thus they hope to swamp and effectively dispense with the activists (including trade unions delegates to GCs) who now, together with the affiliated unions at conference, decide party policy and (since Blackpool) control the MPs.

All this has less to do with voting rights than with the nature and character of the Labour Party and even, by implication (as we shall see), with the character and quality of democracy in Britain.

The right, like Brecht's very logical government, have decisively lost confidence in the people who have rejected them, and now they want to dissolve the Labour Party as it has so far existed and propose to have the media elect a new one for them. The socialist case against what the right falsely presents as an expansion of Labour democracy comes under a number of headings.

1. In the first place they have (in general, and for the Labour Party too) a sadly poverty-stricken, one-dimensional idea of what democracy is and must be for socialists who want to replace capitalist society with one that will be better in many ways, including in its democracy.

There is no evidence that those who demagogically play at being superdemocrats for the press understand that a central part of the socialist criticism of capitalism is that it reduces democracy to mere voting, essentially divorced from either direct or effective mass control of anything. They don't seem to have a inkling that a mass popular party must deepen and

develop the existing British democracy if it wants to transform society. Instead they propose to diminish it.

Voting, some variety of effective popular franchise which really controls what is to be done and those who are delegated to do it, is essential to democracy, and without it there can be no democracy. But mere voting is not itself democracy, nor is it sufficient for democracy. It can be and is used against democracy. Where voting is an empty exercise to rubber-stamp a single list of candidates chosen by another process or where it takes place with any real alternatives to the ruling power being suppressed, that is not democracy.

Even where real choice exists, together with freedom of expression and without serious repression, political democracy is incomplete and limited if the rulers can use their vast resources of wealth, their press, TV and pulpits, to gain a major advantage and bury their opponents under an avalanche of misrepresentation.

Voting can be divorced, by misrepresentation on one side or lack of resources on the other, from real choice and the possibility of real democratic control. (And of course we don't even vote directly on most of the things that determine our lives: for example there isn't even the democracy of a vote for workers in determining what happens to the industries they work in). Voting, unless it's to be a minimal action, needs to be done in the context of real awareness of the issues; of equal and free competition of the contending alternatives, and without repression; and in a situation where the voters have real power to determine by their vote what is going to happen.

The classic democracies of Greece were small city state democracies where the citizens (slaves, aliens and women excluded) knew each other and the issues and were directly involved in the affairs of the entity in whose decision-making process they voted. It really was, in Lincoln's fine definition, government of the people, for the people and by the people. This is what democracy meant to friends and enemies alike in the first half of the 19th century: government of, for and by the people. When the Chartists fought for a vote they intended to use it in the interests of the masses: they believed they were reaching for power, and that by gaining the vote they would inevitably destroy the power of the property owners. That is what their opponents thought it was about, too, and for that reason they fought it bitterly.

Perhaps the greatest political triumph of the bourgeoisie in the last 130 years has been to diminish democracy for the masses to mere voting every few years while leaving power over almost everything that matters in their own hands or of those who would serve them. And this has given a "democratic" legitimacy to their rule. This has meant separating the idea of voting from the complementary idea of rule by and for the people. The ruling class has tamed the democratic suffrage and shaped it into something the Chartists and other early working class democrats would not recognise as their goal. They have done it through a network of bureaucratic, procedural, parliamentary, and in the final resort military, checks and balances.

The demand that the Chartists first raised in the 1830s, for annual parliaments, that is, annual accountability, has not been realised yet; so Margaret Thatcher can rampage through

our lives quite democratically for another three and a half years.

None of the above should be read as a dismissal of the existing democratic rights and liberties that the people of Britain have won; nor as a nod towards the idea that the Stalinist system is therefore better, or tolerable, or excusable. It is not better, nor tolerable, nor excusable, and it is no more socialist than it is democratic. Such pernicious ideas are a poison which can sometimes seep into the labour movement from Stalinism precisely because the socialist criticism of the limitations of the democracy we have is valid.

Socialists have concluded not that we don't need democracy but that democracy must be defended, deepened and qualitatively transformed into government by the working people, of the working people, and for the working people. Today only socialists stand for democracy in the sense of Lincoln's classic modern definition. The "social democrats", like the Tories, believe on the contrary that everything is now for the best in the best of all worlds.

2. The second objection to the postal ballot scheme is that "plebiscitary democracy" in the Labour Party would actually destroy the very possibility of self-controlling democracy in the party.

The present system of multi-dimensional participatory democracy means that the participants have some possibility to think things through as a result of interacting and discussing with their comrades. It allows and demands some preliminary closing of ranks by people committed to the party and to what it stands for or could be made to stand for, against the pressures of the enemies of the party—who are entrenched and immensely strong in the society in which the party exists, and which it exists to change.

Remove the parliamentary element, reduce it to a ballot of mainly passive members and supporters who become involved only to the extent of casting a vote outside the process of party deliberations, and you give power, or at least the power to intervene strongly and directly, in the party to those who control the press and the media, that is, to those who directly express the interests and wishes of the ruling class and even of the Tory Party directly.

To the degree that it chafes them, they are implacably hostile to the party. Their power over people's minds does have its limits. Workers involved in struggle generally shrug it off. But they are a power to be reckoned with nonetheless, and the best way to ensure that they do not have influence is by members of the party listening to each other instead.

Remove participation as a condition of exercising the vote, and you remove the only check and counterbalancing pressure the party has against the pressure of its enemies. At present, the less active members are reached and mobilised at certain times (elections, special events) by the more active members. Under the right's wished-for new system they would be mobilised instead by the press and the media. The isolated parliamentary "stars" of the right hope the media will be their intermediary with the passive party supporters. Having lost the active party of the party, they want to

substitute for it the inactive party: in fact the parliamentary "head" is demanding a body transplant!

3. The third objection is that insofar as it is a proposal to cut Labour Party democracy down to the one-dimensional voting and manipulation of the society around us, its implication is to push down further and degrade the level and quality of democracy in that society.

Socialists fight to deepen democracy in society as the only basis of working class democratic control of all the processes and decision-making in society. Insofar as labour movement democracy exists now, it is a higher

form of democracy than that in the society around us. The labour movement can therefore be a precious base for renewal, a deepening and a qualitative transformation of democracy in society, despite the admittedly inadequate, incomplete and unsatisfactory nature of its own participatory democracy. The right would snuff out all that, and destroy the great potential that exists. The party they want would internalise the one-dimensional democracy around it, and thereby render itself incapable of transforming it.

If the Labour Party were to follow their advice, Britain would have taken a giant step towards US-style "democratic politics". The New Statesman rightly commented on the recent Presidential Elections that the USA could scarcely be considered a democracy at all: "...America's claim to be a democracy is now only marginally credible." In such elections the media, the media-manipulating and media-manipulated politicians (which means moneyed politicians) dominate amorphous parties whose "democracy" is a sort of plebiscitary democracy.

Politics and personalities are got up as a commercial product to seek power: trimmed, designed, coloured, flavoured and packaged to sell, via the media, to a passive electorate and initially to passive party voters in primaries. Jimmy Carter, with his private pollster to sniff the wind and tell him what to say from day to day, epitomises the degradation and debasement of political life involved in this business—as does Ronald Reagan, the successful candidate for President, whose lips were sealed from unscripted comments by his packagers lest he actually reveal himself to the electorate.

Politics becomes emptied of real political content, personalised, and almost a branch of show business. Inevitably, little fundamental is actually decided in the election: it is therefore left to the direct decision of the ruling class behind the scenes. 52% of the electorate abstained on November 4th; people know that little is decided or even posed, and that they live in the politics of manipulation and money-fuelled political beauty contests. They see a yawning gap between what is said and what is done.

Now many of the features described above exist to some degree, even to an alarming degree, in Britain, where too much of what is done is not put to the electorate, for instance the scandalous example of the secret updating of Polaris (by a Labour government!).

But these features are not predominant—not yet. There is still some possibility of a party like the Labour Party working out politics and contributing to the education of

society for such politics because the party itself still exists to an extent outside of the contamination of consensus politics and direct manipulation by the media. This is precisely because it has a certain initial narrowness of focus, or can have, before going to the electorate—that is, because it remains a political party in a meaningful sense. It may be a broad church, but it is not diffuse and amorphous to the point of having no distinct political identity and no purpose other than to win elections; and still less, to win elections merely for personalities totally beyond its control and manipulating it in primaries via the media.

Thus it is a force to resist and reverse the powerful trends towards the Americanisation of British politics. And the right are the vanguard of such politics when they propose one-dimensional votes-only democracy for the

Labour Party. In a certain sense theirs is a consistent response to the Brighton/Blackpool abolition of the safeguards which have allowed the ruling class to live with the Labour Party because the PLP had the right to do what it liked and was an effective buffer. They prefer to diminish democracy generally than to accept an advance of democracy which threatens their interests.

4. The fourth objection is that the proposal is inevitably a proposal to cut the party's organic link with the bedrock of the labour movement, the trade unions. The union vote represents collectively worked-out social and political aspirations. The right would abolish this, reducing union participation to the atomised votes of individuals.

There is nothing to idealise about the block vote system. But trade union democracy can be improved, the same as Labour Party democracy. To cut the links with the unions has nothing to do with democracy. Just like introducing one-member-one-vote in the party itself, it has nothing to do with democracy and everything to do with the working class character of the Labour Party and with the fact that the right find this increasingly unpalatable.

Nor should we idealise the fact that only a small proportion of the party's members attend its meetings and take part in its activity and deliberations. But in no way does the right want to improve the situation in the only meaningful way—the involvement of the party in class and community struggles, in the movement for women's rights, in the fight against racism and gay oppression; and by the active and lively involvement of those engaging in those struggles in the participatory democracy of the Labour Party.

The right could even less live comfortably with such a mass participating membership than it can with the limited number of activists we have now. In the last analysis it was the anger of activists, and of the trade unions, with the last Labour government that fuelled the big drive for democracy at the last two annual conferences.

The right does not want a mass membership, if it has real democratic rights. Essentially now that the party has turned in the direction of a party of committed activists, pushing for democracy and accountability, they just don't want the party as it now exists. They want a radical new concept—they want to neutralise the party now that the PLP can no longer ignore it with impunity.

Socialism and Democracy page 19

We must build a mass Labour Party membership, with as much active involvement as possible. We must fight like the plague the attempt to "Americanise" the Labour Party and to put it under the sway of Saatchi and Saatchi and the Fleet Street press barons.

PR, DEMOCRACY AND SOCIALISM

By John O'Mahony
(Socialist Organiser, 5 January 1989)

Democracy is one of the most abused and prostituted words in the political dictionary. Mrs Thatcher is a great "democrat" in her speeches and demagoguery—the self same Mrs Thatcher who has done more in the last decade to increase the element of autocratic state control in our lives than any prime minister since the end of World War 2. The same Mrs Thatcher who works as the relentless agent of the economic tyrants who control British finance and industry, and therefore rule our lives, completely outside any democratic control or accountability.

People like Mrs Thatcher give democracy a bad name. And there is far worse, in a world where even the totalitarian states of the Eastern Bloc call themselves "People's Democracies". Nevertheless, the socialist who is not a democrat is not a socialist. There can be no socialism unless people democratically control their own society? at every level, from overall governmental administration down to the affairs of their own factory or office.

True, the Thatchers of this world have helped the Stalinists to convince lots of good socialists that democracy is and always must be a sham. Working class socialists look around them in Britain and see that whatever about the legal equality of all citizens when it comes to voting, in fact people like Rupert Murdoch and Robert Maxwell are a very great deal more equal than others.

Whatever about formal equality, formal free speech, and so on—and even those formal rights are very important in themselves, and worth defending until we can do better—in reality the wealth and power of the bosses in industry and in the media give them massive advantages. They can manipulate and dominate the lives of millions under the cloak of a formal democracy which is thereby neutralised and emptied of content.

The programme of democracy which the early British labour movement, the Chartists, fought for as long ago as the 1830s and '40s—annual parliaments, for example—has not yet been realised. The limited democracy and comparative liberty we have now is better than any form of police-state dictatorship. But it is, nevertheless, very much of a sham.

The socialist who concludes that democracy must always be a sham is not only giving up on democracy, but on socialism itself. Without democracy "socialism" becomes a lying label for one or another form of dictatorship by a new ruling class elite.

Socialists must be consistent democrats. That does not mean that we make a religion of the forms, methods and institutions of the half-sham bourgeois democracy we have

now. It does not mean believing that we can get socialism peacefully and legally by way of the existing institutions: the whole of history teaches us otherwise.

No ruling class gives up its power and wealth peacefully; a ruling class threatened by socialism will smash up its own legality and its own democracy and use violence to crush the socialists. Look at what happened in Chile—with the active support of the US government—in 1973. The army smashed what had been one of the oldest democracies in the world, in order to overthrow a legally-elected Socialist government. They would try to do the same thing in Britain if socialism threatened.

But socialism must include a fight for consistent democracy. Consistent democracy throughout society—the original idea expressed in the name the workers' parties of Europe chose for themselves 100 years ago, Social Democracy—can only be achieved when private ownership of the means of production is replaced by a democratically-controlled collectivist system. To fight for socialism is to fight for democracy—every inch and every millimetre of the way.

The discussion on proportional representation now getting under way in the labour movement can only be taken to sensible conclusions if these considerations are fully taken into account. Proportional representation is normally a far more sensitive measure of registering electors' opinion than the system we now have in Britain. It allows each vote to have roughly the same weight, while the first-past-the-post system gives many votes no weight at all. In a word, PR is more democratic.

On the level of principle, socialists cannot be opposed to improving and extending bourgeois democracy, however small the extension may be. Therefore, on principle we must declare ourselves for proportional representation. The arguments against this are weighty but short-term and narrowly empirical. Yes, proportional representation is being argued for by Labour's right wing. Yes, it is used by those who think it will ensure that there will never again be a majority Labour government. Yes, it is now linked to the half-hidden programme of that section of the Labour Party leadership who want to go for a Democrat-SDP-Labour coalition. But to come out in principle against a bettering of the electoral system is not the best way to fight the right wing and the coalitionists. It is more likely to discredit the left.

In fact there are some prominent left-wing advocates of PR—like Arthur Scargill—and some prominent right-wing opponents of it, like Roy Hattersley. In any case, how can PR be argued against outside the quite narrow circles of the left itself?

We are against bettering democracy because we think it will be bad for our party? Isn't that what Thatcher and her labour movement understudies say about us anyway, that we are against democracy? Isn't that, also, just another way of saying what the faint-hearts and coalitionists say: that Labour can't win? The left version is that we can win—but only with the rigged electoral system that the ruling class set up long ago... Yes, we can win! Yes, we can get an overall democratic majority! We can win with socialist politics and a crusading labour movement.

Socialism and Democracy page 20

That's what we say now to Kinnock and the other fainthearts and trimmers. Or should we amend it to say: Yes, we can win—provided the ruling class doesn't marginally extend democracy? The idea is absurd. Yet that is what we would have to say in honesty, and if we don't say that all we are left with is mumblings and private intra-Labour arguments about which system is most advantageous to us — arguments we could not possibly use generally.

A parallel—a limited and partial one—is perhaps useful here. In the early years of this century, there was quite strong resistance among socialists in countries like Belgium and France to votes for women. Women got the vote in France as late as 1945. Why? Because some of the socialists calculated that women were more backward and conservative, and more likely to be under the influence of the Catholic Church, than men, and that to give them the vote would massively strengthen the parties of the status quo. At any given moment, that might have been an accurate calculation. Socialists like Rosa Luxemburg nevertheless championed votes for women, arguing that if the socialists could not break through to the women then socialism was going to be impossible anyway.

So too with us. We want to kick out the Tories as soon as possible. Any Labour government would be better, if only because it would be weaker (whatever its leaders might want) under pressure from the labour movement. But if we argue in principle against an extension of democracy because we believe the less democratic system is the only one under which we can win, then we put ourselves in an invidious position. That, in our opinion, is the position in principle. There is more to it, of course.

As we have argued above, what we have in Britain and similar countries is a feeble and in many ways sham democracy, in which the ruling class has massively unfair advantage. That democracy needs more than tinkering with before it will be anything like real democracy. It will take a socialist revolution to make the qualitative leap from what we have to the democracy the working class needs.

Socialists cannot in principle oppose PR; but here and now there is nothing that compels us to make a religion of it—nothing that compels us to support the Labour right wing's campaign for this small improvement in a grossly deficient system and say to hell with the consequences.

PR is now the cry of the coalitionists in the labour movement. The coalitionists must be opposed and defeated. They must be told: yes, PR is good, but there are more pressing things before the labour movement—the battle to kick out the Tories and to ensure that the labour movement has real alternative policies and is not dominated by pink Thatcherism.

They must be told that their campaign for PR not only detracts from the main question of fighting for a working class alternative to Thatcherism, but gives immediate advantages to the ruling class and its parties. That—rather than the untenable and (from the point of view of consistent democracy) unprincipled opposition to PR as such—is the way to answer the coalitionists.

On that basis the left should say to the right wingers who want to distract us now with a campaign for a little bit of democratic tinkering— no, not now, not this campaign. Right now, the labour movement must fight to get rid of the Tories and to put in a government based on the working class and committed to secure its needs. Labour must contest every parliamentary constituency.