

POLAND AND STALINISM

In this article I wish to cover the question of the "Right of self-determination" with regard to the Eastern European countries and their relationship to the USSR. But in order to do this, I will have to make reference to two other questions of some dispute in the movement. The most important of these is the use by some comrades of the term "potentially progressive" when describing the nationalised property relations in the SU and E Europe. This is something I strongly disagree with and which I think affects the present position on Poland. The other point, which has only just arisen is the failure of some comrades to recognise the dangers from imperialism to the nationalised property relations. With some comrades this goes further to the actual assertion that there is no such danger.

The right of self-determination

This was put forward on the NC as one of the WSL's "Solidarity" demands and accepted with a small majority. It has since been expanded in the TILC resolution in two ways. Firstly, with the slogan "For an Independent Socialist Poland"; and secondly, with a paragraph in the text explaining that we fight for Polish self-determination as part of our programme for a political revolution. These two additions were included in the TILC resolution with the support of the whole WSL delegation.

I think that as a solidarity slogan, "For Polish self-determination" is wrong. I think that the slogan put forward by Trotskyists should be "For an Independent Socialist Poland". This slogan would allow us to immediately relate to the progressive content of the hostility to the Kremlin bureaucracy. But it would also allow us to develop that hostility in a transitional way towards the political revolution. At the same time, through such a slogan, we would easily be able to distinguish ourselves from the social democrats and reactionaries. In all our propaganda, we would explain that socialism means the working class in power, and not social democracy. It would be impossible to directly adapt the slogan which Trotsky used in relation to the Ukraine - "For an Independent Soviet Ukraine" - as this would be confusing. But we should try to capture as much of that meaning as possible.

Let us be clear from the beginning that I am in favour of the Polish people having the right to self-determination. I am no way in favour of tanks from the SU deciding what takes place in Poland, unless it is as a defensive action against a direct imperialist military intervention. But that is a general orientation. To simply turn that orientation into a slogan can create important problems. For, as a slogan, it is abstract and open to many different interpretations. It can connect up with extremely reactionary nationalist elements which want to bring Poland under the control of imperialism under the guise of "independence".

Insofar as the relations of Poland to the Soviet Union are concerned, the call by many of the nationalist elements for "independence" is characterised by a strong anti-communism. To be more precise, it is characterised not by opposition to the anti-working class bureaucracy, but by opposition to the nationalised property relations. This point mainly applies to emigre elements. Within Poland, although there is much confused political thought, the general position of the working class is not for a return to capitalism. The demands of workers in struggle and solidarity statements made that quite clear. The demands of the workers are for political transformations and economic changes which could only occur on the basis of nationalised property relations.

I am not suggesting that other comrades say that we are for the right of self-determination and leave it at that. But if we do do that, then we are suggesting that Poland can be independent, can pull away from the Stalinist camp, and somehow develop without being ensnared in the imperialist camp. But we must remember that this is the same Poland which has a 27-billion dollar debt to the

West. In addition, a vast sum is owed to the USSR whose industry and economy are approaching a state of collapse. In reality, even if the USSR did not intervene, Poland could never take some "democratic" path under capitalism. It has not got the economic basis for that. Far from being under the control of the Polish people, let alone the Polish working class, a capitalist Poland would be under the control of the imperialist banks. Far from independence, the banks would own Poland. They would pursue a path not of democracy, but of profiteering and plunder, of retribution. And they would do this with their tanks behind them.

The reality is that the only way that Poland can develop, outside of Stalinist or imperialist control, is along the road of political revolution based on proletarian internationalism - i.e., combined with the struggle for such a revolution throughout E Europe and in the USSR, and for a social revolution in the capitalist countries. There is no other basis on which the Polish people can determine their own future. This is the struggle for independent class politics that the Marxist movement has always fought for. It is necessary, in our propaganda and agitation, to make clear the only real basis for independence from imperialism and Stalinism.

There are many Polish workers with nationalist ideas. They or other nationalist elements may say to us that they have the right to determine their own future. They may put forward the slogan of self-determination. We do not say that we disagree with them or that we are opposed to their struggle. But we do say that a genuine self-determination can only be achieved in a revolutionary way on a socialist political and economic basis. So we need a slogan which can take up the right to self-determination and point the way forward in developing the progressive hostility to the Kremlin bureaucracy. We need a slogan which can take up existing nationalist sentiment and consciousness but develop it politically in a transitional way towards the political revolution. The slogan "For an Independent Socialist Poland" serves these tasks. And it is therefore the slogan which we ourselves should put forward.

Soviet Union and National Oppression Historically

For the Bolsheviks after the revolution, the question of national oppression of the countries around them was not invented in an abstract way. It was posed in a very real way in a situation where the Bolshevik government was trying to exist with a correct approach to national rights at a time of war and revolution.

Take for example the "Preliminary Draft Theses on the National and Colonial Question" written by Lenin in 1920 for the second Congress of the Comintern (Theses, Resolutions and Manifestoes of the First Four Congresses of the Third International, pp 76 - 81). Lenin talks of the need for a closer union with the "working people of the various nations and the Soviet Union". Therefore, he argues in Thesis 7 for a federation as a "transitional form to the complete unity of the working people of different nations", and he cites as examples the relations between the RSFSR and the Soviet Republics of Hungary, Finland, Latvia, Azerbaidjan and the Ukraine. He also cites the autonomous republics of the Balkans and Tartars. Why does he argue for federation? Because this is a much looser form/unification, and is aimed at taking into account the "national" feelings of the peoples of those countries, many of whom had actually been previously oppressed by Russia.

But why does he argue for any relationship? Well, this is argued in Thesis 8 and is quite straightforward. It is based on the impossibility of developing the productive forces in countries surrounded by a hostile imperialist world, other than through this relationship. Such a relationship would be both political and an economic.

This attitude of Lenin's comes out quite clearly in his article 'On the Nationalities Question' (in Lenin's fight against Stalinism). Here he is taking up the role of Orjonikidze and Dzerzhinsky and behind them Stalin in the

"Georgian affair". He even proposes that it might be necessary to "take a step backwards at our next Congress of Soviets, i.e. retain the USSR only for military and diplomatic affairs, and in all other respects restore full independence to the individual peoples commissariats" (p 137). He says this in order to defend the revolution's prestige with the emerging anti-imperialist movements and says that we must not be seen to have any vestige of "those imperialist attitudes."

Invasion of Poland 1920

This is often cited by anti-Marxists as an example of "neo-imperialist elements" in the Bolshevik tradition. In fact, it was defensive counter-attack, launched only after the bourgeois Polish army had attacked the RSFSR. It had two aims: firstly to stop any further attack; secondly to help the Polish workers seize power. The Bolsheviks saw the massive oppression of the workers and peasants of Poland at the hands of a bourgeoisie which was being assisted in every possible way by the imperialists (especially through arms). They thought that this was an uneven battle which the Polish workers could not win without outside help. To the Bolsheviks the Polish campaign was necessary to defend the revolution against imperialism. It was also an internationalist act of proletarian solidarity. It is something for which no Marxist has to apologise. On the contrary, we should be proud of it, and sorry only for its failure in its second goal. I do not want to deal here with the reasons for that failure. But one thing must be made clear: it was not in any way a chauvinist campaign. For example Order 217 in May 1920 attacked any mistreatment of prisoners, despite the fact the Polish White Guard forces were torturing and killing Red Army soldiers. Order 230 closed down the Military Science journal of the Red Army because of a racist remark in an article. Even when the Red Army was winning they still talked about the "inviolability of Polish territory".

The reality of the Polish campaign was this: the Polish government enslaved the people of Lithuania and the Ukraine. The Bolshevik government offered them peace terms. These were rejected and the Polish army then invaded Russian territory. The Red Army then fought back, drove the Polish bourgeois army back to the edge of Warsaw, was defeated and was driven back. The Riga Peace was then made. This left the Polish bourgeoisie in a worse position than when they first invaded. They still controlled Lithuania, but parts of the Ukraine had been freed. So far from this being a great defeat for the Red Army and an example of its "imperialist attitudes" it was a blow to the real imperialists who were using their stooge Pilsudski. Nonetheless, the imperialists still ended up enslaving the Lithuanian people.

In the case of Poland, the Bolsheviks were willing to use a defensive invasion in an effort to promote the Polish revolution. Yet the whole way through, they did not in any way relinquish the general Marxist commitment to the right for self-determination. But that general position was concretised. The same thing happened in the case of the other states within the RSFSR. Here, the Bolsheviks were willing to advance federalism. The slogans were completely different. But each slogan took account of nationalist feelings and was based on a general orientation in support of national self-determination. If the slogans were different, the method underlying them was the same. The way the Bolsheviks proceeded was to take account of nationalist feelings and try to develop them in whatever, in the circumstances, was the progressive direction.

I have tried to show, then, that "self-determination" was never a simple slogan or question. Of course, conditions changed from one case to the next. Now the Soviet Union has degenerated, and so the questions today are different. But I think that the method, of taking full account of nationalist feelings, but trying to develop them in a progressive way, must be the same.

Ukraine: Trotsky's real position

Cde. S. sometimes suggests that his position arises simply and directly out of Trotsky's writings. I think that only a cursory reading of Trotsky shows this to be false, and study demolishes it.

In In Defence of Marxism Trotsky calls for an "independent Soviet Ukraine" and for that matter says that he would suggest the same as regards Byelorussia. His position just before and during the war was the same. In an article written on April 22, 1939 he says "A clear and definite slogan is necessary that corresponds to the new situation. In my opinion there can be at the present time only one such slogan; a united, free and independent workers' and peasants' soviet Ukraine" (Writings, 1938 -39, p 304). Cde. S. now tries to say that Trotsky's real position was for an "independent Ukraine". He says that the demand includes "soviet" because of the particular conditions, especially the war. In fact, Trotsky is not just dealing with the Ukrainian question because of the proximity or existence of the war. He specifically attacks those "socialists" and "communists" who only take up this question because it was brought to the forefront of world attention because of the approach of war.

Several questions were involved in the Ukrainian question. At that time the Ukraine was split; part controlled by the capitalists of Poland and Hungary, and part in the Soviet Union. It is clear from Trotsky's slogan (stressing unity) that it was not only referring to the part of the Ukraine in the SU. The article makes this even clearer. So he is attacking the treatment which the capitalists give to the oppressed peoples: the way the capitalists trample on the national rights of the Ukrainians, as well as their oppression at the hands of the Stalinist bureaucracy. But I think it is clear that he is presenting a slogan based on the property relations inside the Soviet Ukraine. If Trotsky developed his slogan in this way because of the threat of war then it was being based on the danger of the invasion of the Soviet Union. But if it was based just on that danger Trotsky would not have stressed "independent".

Trotsky makes this clear when he says the following in relation to Finnish resistance to a Soviet attack: "Finland's resistance to the USSR was, with all its heroism, no more an act of independent national defence than Norway's subsequent resistance to Germany. The Helsinki govt itself understood this when it chose to capitulate to the USSR, rather than transform Finland into a military base for England and France. Our wholehearted recognition of the right of every nation to self determination does not alter the fact that in the case of the present war, this right does not have much more weight than thistle-down. We must determine the basic line of our policy in accordance with basic and not tenth-rate factors." (Manifesto of the FI, 1939 - 40, p 198)

In relation to Finland, where war was the basic factor, 'independence' could not weigh more than thistle-down. But in relation to the Ukraine, Trotsky includes 'independence' because his position is not based just on the fact of the war.

Trotsky made clear his attitude to "nationalists" in the 1939 article. He wrote: "Not the slightest compromise with imperialism, either fascist or democratic* Not the lightest concession to the Ukrainian nationalists, either clerical, reactionary, or liberal-pacifist! No people's fronts! The complete independence of the proletarian party as the vanguard of the toilers!" (p 30)

True, he declares that this is a personal position. He expresses the hope that as the international discussion opens up, the Ukrainian resolution would be an especially important part of it. But this was certainly Trotsky's position at the time.

(Cde. S. quotes from a later article on the question of independence - 'Independence of the Ukraine and Sectarian Muddleheads'. This article begins with an attack against sectarians who have opposed the slogan of an independent Soviet Ukraine and have expressed outright hostility to the rights of the Ukrainian