

Polemic: So who are the 'sheep'?

Correspondence from Russia

This is an edited translation of two letters published in issue no.2 of Politprosvet [Political Education], the journal of a group of socialists in Cheliabinsk, in the southern Urals, one of Russia's big industrial areas.

The first letter is from a member of the Russian Communist Workers Party, founded in 1992 and led by Viktor Anpilov and Viktor Tiul'kin. The RCWP's anti-parliamentarism distinguished it from the much larger Communist Party of the Russian Federation, which has a big parliamentary fraction and whose leader, Gennadii Ziuganov, stood against El'tsin in the 1996 presidential election. After the White House siege of October 1993 and the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet, the RCWP boycotted the parliamentary elections and concentrated on building its alliance with right-wing nationalists through a campaign of street demonstrations - but it abandoned the boycott for the December 1995 elections.

The second letter is by one of the editors of Politprosvet, Viktor Avdevich.

We also publish a comment on the correspondence by Simon Pirani a participant in the International Socialist Forum.

A letter from S.V. Miliakha of Chaikovskii city, in Perm region

Greetings, Viktor Ivanovich!

It is a pleasure and an advantage to be in contact with you. [...] In many respects we are co-thinkers - although there are divergences, of which more below ...

I am a member of the RCWP. I understand that the CPRF and Ziuganov are in no way communists, but social democrats. I am strongly opposed to the split that has taken shape in the RCWP between Tiul'kin and Anpilov. [Anpilov, accused of compromise with Ziuganov, has been removed from key positions in the RCWP.] If the party splits I will take Anpilov's side.

However I also understand that today the 'working class' is, in essence, a philistine group, incapable of mass political struggle. That is why the most important thing today is propaganda: today we are 'populists': we must go to the people with counter-propaganda. [The populist move-

ment of the 1870s, formed from the urban middle class, resolved to 'go to the people', i.e. literally to travel to the countryside to propagandise the struggle against tsarism.] And therefore today is not the time to struggle for the purity of ideas, but a time to struggle for the overthrow of this anti-popular [El'tsin] regime. We must unite all national-patriotic forces. And in this respect I support Ziuganov.

We must go to the [Russian parliamentary] elections [in December 1997] and win deputies' positions, because - if they really want to, if they do not slide into the opportunist swamp - there is much practical work that communist deputies can do.

Now about Politprosvet.

1. I believe that your theoretical views and researches are timely and necessary - that is, for those who are able (by virtue of their education) and who want to involve themselves, i.e. for propagandists. For mass distribution in a working-class milieu, Politprosvet would not be understood. The journal's aim, understanding-propaganda-organisation, is correctly set out.

2. You write of the catastrophic inadequacy of our forces; that is correct. On the other hand: 'In this country the workers only potentially comprise a class.' Also correct. I would go further: the mass of workers today are obtuse philistines (this is the evaluation of the newspaper Argumenti i kontrargumenti, No.6, 1996, for example). That's how it is. The worker sits in the smoking room and heaps curses on everybody, starting with his managers. He does not believe in the communists. He speaks with a hint of pride - how clever he is. And really he is a sheep; he has no idea where he is going. Because he does not read anything (apart from detective novels), he watches TV and takes it in unthinkingly, and he does not search for truth.

'Sheep' like this are the majority. They are languishing in poverty, but many of them vote for El'tsin, so that things won't get any worse. The trouble is that, in socialist times, the majority of people became so used to the idea that the state would not leave them in poverty, that they can not believe that it will throw them out of their flats or refuse to help them resist hunger.

Today there is no 'working class'. That is the reality from which we must proceed. In fact today the peasantry is more conscious and more revolutionary than the worker-

philistines in the towns. But in your work you take no account either of the peasantry or of the working intelligentsia.

Therefore, your idea that 'the emancipation of the workers is the task of the working class itself' is admissible only as a slogan; it can not be regarded as a practical position. Unless they are united with the above-mentioned groups [peasantry and intelligentsia], then the 'sheep' of the 'working class' will go more quickly under the knife than into organised political struggle.

3. I do not doubt the importance of theoretical and ideological work. Yes, it is necessary! But I think that you underestimate practically attainable aims, i.e.:

- Participation in all elections, in order to bring our deputies to power and to propagandise our ideas (through the election campaigns, the parliament, etc);

- Unity of all opposition forces against the regime. I think that today this is the most important aim, because if the regime is not overthrown, then in a few years we simply will not be here; there will be nobody left to concern themselves with theoretical work and ideological research. Today even Anpilov has understood this, and changed his tactics. You describe the RCWP as 'an apology for a revolutionary organisation' - without proof. [The party's] idea of an all-Russian political strike is correct in principle. It is another matter that there is no realistic possibility of one. That is understood by both Anpilov and Tiul'kin; but they have both thrown the idea into discussion. And why not?! How can this be considered a 'provocation' (your italics)? According to your reasoning, we could blame Marx for throwing in the communist idea (without prior preparation for reality).

There is another problem. I believe that you underestimate the significance, at the present stage, of uniting all opposition forces. On the other hand, it is not good enough to make unsubstantiated criticisms of groups, parties and movements who call themselves communists. Either make a fundamental criticism or don't make one at all. [...]

4. Without practical work, even a group of the truest Marxists will be left on the margins of political struggle. Life will go on; they will be left to themselves. There will be no use for such a group and its ideas. That is why I [...] can not agree that 'proletarian activists will work successfully, if they take up ideological work rather than direct political struggle.' [...]

5. Concerning printed material. The opposition today has dozens of newspapers and journals, national and local, produced by enthusiasts under the most difficult conditions. And they should be thanked for this. [...] Uniting them all is both impossible and unnecessary. However the inadequacy of all these publications is that they have little or no contact between themselves. And so if Politprosvet can undertake the function of developing such contacts (views, criticisms, discussions, etc) this would

be a tremendous contribution to our common work. [...] 15.8.96.

Answer to comrade S.V. Miliakha from the editors of Politprosvet

Greetings, Sergei Vladimirovich!

I am happy that some of Politprosvet's ideas are in keeping with yours. Ideally, it would be no bad thing to develop this harmony and clear away disagreements. Unfortunately, in practice, things often go the other way. [...] All the same one hopes, every time, that among one's 'co-thinkers on many issues', one will find, simply, co-thinkers. And I am hoping so this time, too.

Concerning your observations. You have noted quite correctly that our journal is not addressed to [...] a popular readership. From the start we thought of it as a publication for activists of the workers' movement, for propagandists. Today propaganda among workers - and here again we agree - is our fundamental task.

But the whole problem is this: with what do we go to the workers? What do we need to propagate? Is it really all the same, whether we go to workers with thinly-masked ideas of the necessity of co-operating with capitalists [...] - or with ideas of overthrowing not only the present regime, but the whole capitalist system? Advocates of both these ideas can be found in the opposition. Furthermore there are oppositions who stand solidly for the 'overthrow' of the regime - but they battle away for this with only one aim in mind: to get hold of power themselves. For them there is no question of changing the system as a whole. So - which ideas will we propagandise?

If we do not get to grips with this question, then willingly or unwillingly we will simply be working in the capitalists' interests. Why not fight for 'the purity of ideas'? This is not so much a theoretical question as a practical one. [...]

In my opinion, the fundamental substance of proletarian propaganda is a demonstration of the reality of the situation: the processes that are taking place in the world, the real interests of workers, their position, the abuses of the capitalists and their power, and so on. [...]

And from this point of view I can in no way agree with the ideas advanced by you and your party. You say the main aim is the overthrow of this anti-popular regime! But let us see, let us think, what will this really do for the working people? Suppose that El'tsin's place is taken by Ziuganov, or whoever. Will capitalism and exploitation disappear? Judging by your letter, you yourself do not believe this.

In reality, the substitution of one regime for another will change little for workers. In reality, even the present re-

game changes its appearance in line with changes in the distribution of social forces (we can not fail to see that, to the extent that the national bourgeoisie becomes stronger, so the government's policy becomes more protectionist). [...]

The communist parties' strategy was always directed to changing the whole system; it was always orientated towards revolution. Today, to call directly for an immediate revolution is obviously senseless. But all the same, revolution remains the strategic aim, and all the proletarian party's activity must be directed to the preparation of it, including the preparation of workers for it. [...]

In my opinion, that is reality. It is also reality that today the workers are not organised, that they are not prepared even to undertake economic struggle. You recognise this fact. But it is also a fact that the working class will only achieve political change when the mass of workers participate in an organised way in the movement. No party of the proletariat can achieve anything significant without such participation by workers.

Therefore the hopes that we may immediately unite around Ziuganov or someone else, and in this way achieve something for the working class, are in vain. There will be concessions from the capitalists, of course. But these will come if the workers' movement, rather than separate individuals or groups, demands them.

We insist again and again: today, when there is no workers' movement, it is very easy for those who put demands in the name of the workers to end up in the camp of those against who they are 'fighting'. There is no need to speak of the [Ivan] Rybkins of this world. [Rybkin, at first considered part of the anti-El'tsin opposition, co-operated increasingly with the government as chairman of the Russian parliament 1994-6.] We have the absolutely up-to-date example of [Aman] Tuleev [leading member of the CPRF from Kuzbass; appointed minister for relations with other CIS states by El'tsin in August 1996]. Remember how he poured abuse on the El'tsin regime? He was further left even than Ziuganov, in my view. And what do we see now? He is already a minister, in that same El'tsin's pack.

Now one hears that Anpilov has said that if he is offered a leading post in television, that he will take it. Excuse me, but here we have it again: one more 'fighter' with the regime, ready to enter into the regime's service. Are the warnings not clear enough to you?

They say that they will fight, that we need more deputies. But here we have examples which show where this 'struggle' of the minister-socialists leads. It is an illusion, nothing more. [...]

I believe that practically all the Communist parties today either do not want to, or can not, correctly evaluate the situation from the point of view of the interests of the

working class. Consequently they can not develop a correct line of practical activity. In particular, they totally ignore the fact that the growth of activity by the workers' movement has an objective character. [...] Here is an example.

In relation to the 1905 revolution, Lenin quoted some very characteristic figures. In the ten years beforehand, on average 43,000 workers took strike action each year, i.e. 430,000 in ten years. And in January 1905 alone there were 440,000 workers on strike. More in a month than in a decade! And this increase came about, above all, for objective reasons.

Lenin further noted the presence of both economic and political strikes and the relationship between them. In 1905, among the most advanced engineers, there was a preponderance of political strikes over economic ones, especially towards the end of the year.

'Among the textile workers, on the other hand, we observe an overwhelming preponderance of economic strikes at the beginning of 1905, and it is only at the end of the year that we get a preponderance of political strikes. From this it follows quite obviously that the economic struggle, the struggle for immediate and direct improvement of conditions, is alone capable of rousing the most backward strata of the exploited masses, gives them a real education and transforms them - during a revolutionary period - into an army of political fighters within the space of a few months.' (V.I. Lenin, *Lecture on the 1905 Revolution* [see collected works, standard English edition, vol.23, pp. 241-242]).

What more could be said, to make the point that a proletarian activist must base his activity on reality? Only with a correct estimation of development is successful activity possible.

You are aggrieved that I described the RCWP as 'an apology for a revolutionary organisation'. I completely agree with you that one should criticise essentials, and that that often does not happen. But in this particular case, I used that epithet in an absolutely concrete context: in criticism of the call for a general political strike. You yourself admit: there is no realistic prospect of this. No prospect - and yet the idea is thrown in.

I can not resist mentioning the folk tale about the boy who cried wolf when no wolf was there (he threw in the idea, so to speak). You remember the ending: when a wolf really showed up, no-one believed him. In my opinion, that's a classical example of a provocation and its consequences.

None of the Communist parties want to see the objective character of the development of workers' political activity; denying reality, they seriously overestimate their own ability to bring about political change. Instead of studying that reality, they again and again mistake what they

want with what really is - and end up back where they started. If all the energy that communists expend in attempts to unite 'all the opposition forces' was used to work politically in the working class, their real base, then we might have less shouting and more real ideas.

Further. It is precisely those proletarian activists that throw themselves into the political struggle, overestimating workers' political development in this way, who end up getting 'offended' by the working class. They react by bestowing the most insulting epithets on the workers - and even by completely rejecting any perspectives towards them. You and Pyzhov are by no means alone in this. But the revolution of 1905 (and not only that example) showed that the most backward layers may very rapidly be transformed into an army of political fighters. And it showed how that happened. Was this experience really made in vain? Don't we really have to study it?

Here something should be said of the mutual relations of the working class, peasantry and the intelligentsia, and of the revolutionary potential of the latter groups. [...] Both the peasantry and the intelligentsia are significant forces in society. [...] But it would be a mistake to exaggerate their revolutionary potential.

The point is that peasants and members of the intelligentsia, by virtue of the work that they do, are more individualist than workers. If one talks with them, they may appear more independent, more thoughtful and even more decisive. But this applies to independent, isolated cases. The mass of these social groups depend less on other members of the collective and have less experience of collaborative, collective work than workers. The intelligentsia occupies an intermediate social position which could hardly do otherwise than guarantee its inconsistency. And when the time arrives for organised, collective political activity, neither the intelligentsia or the peasantry will be very well prepared for it.

Right from Marx's time (when the idea that the workers must emancipate themselves was put forward in the Communist Manifesto) the industrial workers have remained, and remain, the most well-prepared for collective action, the most exploited - and today, the most numerous - class. Right from that time, these workers have comprised, and comprise, the most revolutionary class. It would be mistaken to allow the decline of the class' activity, and the fact that it has changed in many respects during this time, to obscure this. Objectively it is precisely the industrial proletariat, and it alone, that may play the leading role in future social transformations.

In your letter, a tendency to separate theoretical and practical work can be seen clearly. But it is characteristic of Marxism that it has always been seen as uniting theory

and practice as two necessary components of successful work. (Remember: there is nothing more practical than a good theory, etc.) [...]

It is another matter that one or other of these components, one or other form of work, may predominate at a particular stage. If a proletarian organisation does not constantly concern itself with the comprehension of reality, with the generalisation of experience, it will end up being defeated. The type of practical work that an organisation can undertake depends on the forces it has at its disposal, on the conditions. If the organisation is small, if it does not have the support of large sections of the workers' movement, there is no way that it can expect seriously to participate directly in political struggle or promise to bring about political change. Proletarian organisations and parties are notorious for deceiving themselves and others on these matters.

What can a weak organisation of the kind we have described really do? Can it work to attract working-class activists to its ranks? It can. Can it work on theoretical material? It can. Can it undertake propaganda and agitation among workers, thereby giving them help? It can and must. All this is entirely feasible, practical and successful work.

[...] The most important thing for a serious proletarian organisation is to help to organise the working class, to help raise the level of working-class struggle and to make that struggle conscious. If proletarian organisations today concentrate on 'practically attainable aims' (such as participation in elections, unification of all the opposition forces etc), will they be working towards this crucial goal? No! Such activity will simply sow a new crop of illusions among workers, that their problems can be resolved without their participation. That is how it is. [...]

None of us will dispute the proposition that, unless it conquers political power, the working class can not realise its political interests. But we must not forget that this task will be carried out not by a party but by the class: the organised class, the class acting consciously, the class prepared by previous economic struggles. And the aim of the party now consists precisely of helping the class to organise, to bring to it ideology. This is the main aim - even if in achieving it we use political means (such as participation in representative organs etc). But today we see that the means are overshadowing the ends. [...]

In conclusion may I thank you for your letter. [...] With very best wishes,

V. Avdevich.