

The Revolutionary Party: a Contribution to the Discussion

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I must congratulate the Iranian comrades for producing the document *The Minimum Platform of Revolutionary Socialism*, making it available in English and organising this discussion about it. It deserves a wide circulation and discussion in the labour movement.

I begin with some questions:

- 1) Can there be more than one revolutionary party?
- 2) Can there be more than one revolutionary programme?
- 3) Must the revolutionary party be a vanguard party?
- 4) Can there be more than one vanguard party?
- 5) If there are several organisations claiming this title, how do you pick the right one?
- 6) If the criterion is the 'correctness' of the programme, what criteria must be applied to judge 'correctness'?
- 7) Who chooses these criteria?
- 8) Finally, who decides which programme is 'correct'?

The document makes the distinction between the class vanguard and the vanguard party. The class vanguard is composed of all those, irrespective of party affiliation or social origin, who are at the sharp end in the struggle against capital. The composition of this class vanguard changes as battles are won and lost, as new issues arise, and as other sections of workers are drawn into struggle. There may be workers who are members of vanguard organisations, while really being involved in such struggles at the same time. These workers may be in the 'vanguard', but not by virtue of their membership of this or that organisation, only because of their position in the struggle against capital.

Now, some more questions:

- a) Do we (ie the class) need a vanguard party?
- b) Can such a party be a mass party, or must it remain a cadre party?
- c) Can such a party be 'pluralistic', ie can it accommodate politically the variety of opinions, trends and cross-currents, which a mass movement must inevitably

generate? (This is really a more specific form of question b).

d) Can a monolithic party rule (?) or 'create' a (pluralistic) socialist society?

Questions like these indicate the main questions: what is a vanguard party? What are its essential features, the features which distinguish it from organisations which are not of the vanguard type, in its own terms or in the opinion of anyone else?

The Vanguard Party, its Ideology and Structure

The ideology of the vanguard party is based upon statements like this:

Social development is governed by laws which are independent of human will and consciousness, and are therefore objective. These laws are similar to the laws of Physics and Chemistry, and, like these, can be known, understood and applied. The historic task of the vanguard party - (that's us) - is to apply the laws, formulate policies and a programme, and then tell the workers what to do, when to do it, and how. This is our REVOLUTIONARY MISSION!

So, according to this ideology, if there are several such groups, each of them can claim to have all the answers, as many answers as there are groups - and there are a lot of them! Each claims direct lineage from Marx and Lenin, with proprietary rights over the way the 'laws' should be applied. (Intellectual property is not such a new idea, after all!) Each of them interprets the past, forms policies for the present and writes programmes for the future. Each claims that it is 'correct' and that all the others are 'wrong', sometimes because they have capitulated to the enemy, or sometimes because they are just plain stupid. Each 'knows' that there is only one 'correct' answer to any question, and that it has got it.

This 'knowledge' gives each group the right, not just to call itself, but to be, the vanguard party. Each claims the right to intervene in, to manipulate, to control and ultimately to take over, all actions of the class, actually to substitute itself for the class. This includes trades unions at all levels, Trades Councils, Community Associations, tenants associations, not to mention Workers Coun-

cils, before, during and after workers take power.

Organisations like this are, of course, inherently sectarian. This has nothing to do with their size. What marks them out is their arrogant and patronising attitude to ordinary workers as well people in general. We can trace this attitude to quotations like the following: 'Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without'. (Lenin, *What is to be Done?*)

Apart from anything else, this quotation is incomplete, and taken out of the social and historical context from which it was written in 1902. Dogmatically applied, such statements provide the main theoretical (?) basis for the existence of these elitist groups.

Democratic Centralism

Such a group needs an organisational form corresponding to its political outlook, and this is provided by the so-called 'Democratic Centralism'. This is democratic in appearance, in form, but bureaucratic in essence, in its fundamental nature. All committees may be elected periodically, but real power lies at the top, in a Political Bureau, or, as in the CPGB after 1943, a Political Committee.

The aim of the bureaucracy is CONTROL, (a) of the Party and (b) of the class by means of the Party. This is how it exercises its 'revolutionary leadership'. We can call this INSTRUMENTALISM. The Party is used as an 'instrument' to control the class in its spontaneous revolutionary action, and then to operate the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in the name of the class. In the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe before 1989, this was done by means of the system called NOMENKLATURA, the personnel which the Party placed in all the important positions in economic and social life.

Discussion was encouraged in the CPGB, of which I was a member for 35 years, but this was nearly always in areas where some adjustment in Party work was felt necessary by the leaders. The PC decided the boundaries of the discussion, what could be discussed, when to start and, especially, when to stop. Sometimes a distinction was drawn between 'constructive' and 'destructive' criticism. Of course, the PC decided which was which. Occasionally, views which had been acceptable last week, were unacceptable this week, for example, in 1948, when it was suddenly announced that Tito's Yugoslavia was guilty of 'anti-Soviet attitudes'. (The following year, we were informed that the country was led by 'fascist agents of imperialism'.)

In those countries where, it was alleged, 'the working class holds political power', the process of dissent and its outcome are well known. All 'criticism' led to 'persistent criticism', which was soon unmasked as 'an anti-Party attitude', then as 'counter-revolutionary ac-

tivity'. When the critic was found to be an 'enemy of the people', they could be assassinated, first politically, then physically.

The vanguard party is monolithic, not pluralistic, so it can never 'create' a pluralistic socialist society. It needs a dogmatic interpretation of what is euphemistically called 'Marxism' to sustain itself politically and organisationally. Thus it can never be a mass party. This is the insoluble contradiction faced by the vanguard party. Its ideology and form of organisation cut it off from the class which it aims to provide with 'leadership'. In order to increase its influence, it must recruit from the class. But, by this very process, it lays itself open to 'infection' by 'alien ideas'. If these are allowed to grow, it will, in its own terms, become opportunistic and reactionary, preventing it from fulfilling its own 'revolutionary' purpose.

I once formulated three Principles of Democratic Centralism:

- 1) Father knows best.
- 2) Ssh - not in front of the children!
- 3) Keep it in the family.

My partner later suggested a fourth principle, which I am happy to accept, called 'mushroom culture':

- 4) Keep 'em in the dark and feed 'em shit!

This is the diet fed to us by any Nomenklatura. This is how the Party exercises control over the whole of society, and that is what Stalinism means. It is a complete perversion of the ideas of Marx and Engels, who looked forward in the Communist Manifesto to 'an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all'.

